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September 2026

116 PAGE BUMPER SPECIAL

SPECIAL COLLECTOR'S EDITION

NEW SEASON

Your essential guide to the 2026-27 European campaign

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Regular readers of *World Soccer* might have noticed how often we've mentioned the Ekstraklasa, Poland's top flight, in recent years – for its crazy competitiveness, its remarkable stories and interesting characters – and so, we decided to go over for the opening match of the 2026-27 season and check it out for ourselves.

That, alongside stories from France, Romania, Wales, Italy and Denmark, is one of several under the radar items we've taken a look at in this issue, plus all of Europe's biggest leagues, including 59 players to watch out for this season and a focus in on the turbulence at a host of mega-clubs.

Finally, as the world said goodbye to two footballing icons, we paid tribute to Kevin Keegan and Franco Baresi.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

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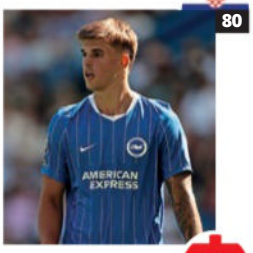

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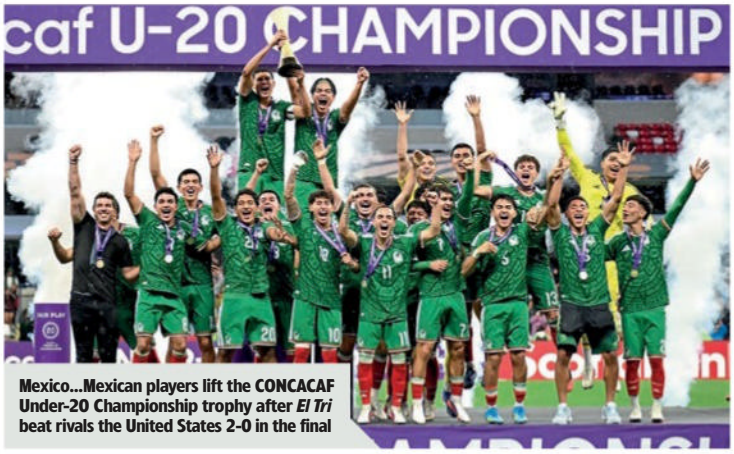

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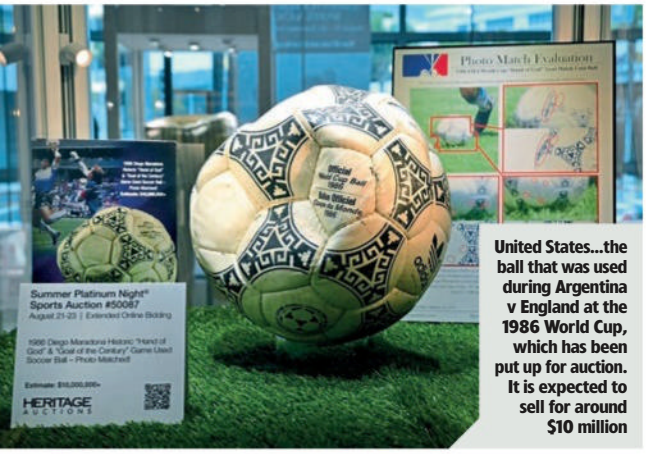

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Henry WINTER
THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

Newcastle fans deserve better from their owners

Let down?... Newcastle fans after the club's takeover in October 2021

It's coming up to the fifth anniversary of thousands of Newcastle United fans gathering outside St James' Park. It doesn't take much to trigger a party on Tyneside, especially around football. This was the mother, father and extended family of all parties on October 7, 2021, everyone invited, dress-code black and white, bring cans. Newcastle's takeover was complete, Mike Ashley's soulless, loveless era was finally swept away, confined unlamented to history. Hope flowed as strong and relentless as the mighty Tyne.

Where are Newcastle fans now? Five years older, perhaps a little bit wiser, still flocking to St James' in numbers – but have they been let down? They're watching a young, promising but inexperienced team shorn of some of its stars. This wasn't what was promised five years ago. They were immediately linked with superstar signings, the likes of Gareth Bale who was then nearing the end of his spell at Real Madrid. Were the Geordie Galacticos about to be formed by Newcastle's Saudi owners?

The Saudi takeover was always going to be controversial given understandable media focus on human rights. What then transpired was more a focus on sustainability and how much the wealthy owners would be able to invest in the team under rules governing Financial Fair Play, subsequently PSR and SCR. These seemed designed to preserve the status quo. Newcastle supporters howled in frustration, some signings were made, not of the Bale level, but eventually a bill had to be paid. Newcastle's revenues rose, up to £335m for 2024-25 but still half Liverpool's. Manchester City, Arsenal, Manchester United, Tottenham Hotspur, Chelsea and Aston Villa also rake in more than Newcastle.

Elliot Anderson was sold to Nottingham Forest for £35m in 2024 to meet an FFP deadline; naively, and pressured by the deadline, Newcastle didn't insert a sell-on clause, vital with any top prospect. In 2025, Alexander Isak went for £125m, joining a club in Liverpool with that greater revenue, bigger wages, and allowed to have more ambition. This summer, Newcastle raked in £236m from the sales of first-team stars Anthony Gordon, Sandro Tonali and Bruno Guimaraes. It felt a good team was being hollowed out.

There wasn't too much sympathy across football as Newcastle sold players. Rival fans argued that they sold their souls when the Saudis came in. Gallowgate habitués point to some magical, historic moments: the first domestic trophy in 70 years with the winning of the Carabao Cup in 2025 and some highlights in the Champions League. But where is the financial commitment from the owners now? Are they still interested?

They insist they are. But Newcastle haven't trained on as expected. They have changed tack, going from experienced talent to cheaper outfield promise. They spent £43m on Hoffenheim forward Bazoumana Toure, £30m on midfielder Aladji Bamba from Monaco and £20m on midfielder Sean Steur of Ajax. Respective ages? 20, 20, 18. They showed their potential in pre-season and Newcastle may have signed a gem or two, who just need polishing to become a glittering presence on Tyneside. But, as with all young players, there will be dips in form. It's unfair to compare them to those who have been sold. Newcastle also spent £25.7m on Braga's 24-year-old goalkeeper Lukas Hornicek.

Eddie Howe's exit was lamented by many and, echoing the signings, he was succeeded by the inexperienced but engaging Matthias Jaissle, who is certainly talking a good game. Formerly of Red Bull Salzburg and Al Ahli, the German is 38, looks fit enough to still be playing, and exudes belief. But the test will come in crunch moments of major games. The test will come in how players respond to training, tactics and team-talks during the season. He doesn't know the league, and the intensity, although Newcastle are already pressing more. If Yoane Wissa stays fit, Jaissle has a chance. Newcastle's match-going fans will certainly want to give him a chance. That's what they traditionally do.

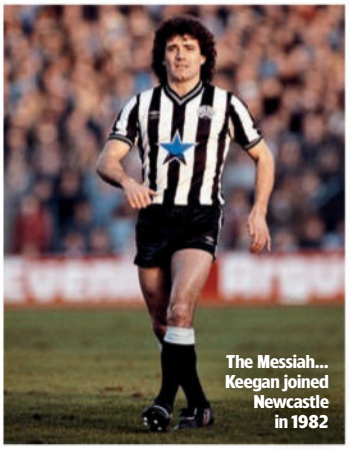
The club are trying to ease doubts about the future. David Hopkinson, the Canadian chief executive, did a series of interviews pre-season and seemed almost to glory in the switch from experienced talent to young hopefuls. "This Newcastle 2.0 team will be young, hungry, ambitious, relentless," Hopkinson told local reporters. "They want to be here and they will fight for everything. This is exciting. This is transformational. This is intentional. Let's go." It sounds like Harvard Business School with a touch of Ted Lasso.

Where is the financial commitment from the owners now? Are they still interested?

There are consultations on a new crest which promptly descended into a debate about seahorses v magpies. But at least the club are consulting. The level of the owners' commitment will be seen in infrastructure, on much-needed upgrades to the training ground and work on a new stadium. At least Hopkinson is indicating a willingness to listen. PIF signals no appetite to listen to fans or talk to them directly. As they mark the fifth anniversary of PIF's takeover, Newcastle supporters deserve better from their owners.

Stepped down ...Eddie Howe

The kindness of King Kev



The Messiah... Keegan joined Newcastle in 1982

It was only after Kevin Keegan left us that we fully appreciated how many lives he had touched. Everyone seemed to have a story about meeting Keegan, and how kind he had been. That told you not only about Keegan's generosity of spirit but also how he was never shut off from the public. Keegan was the everyman, a superstar with two Ballons d'Or, a European Cup and plenty of other titles, but a man with no ego. He was shaped by his Doncaster roots, a working-class hero who never forgot where he came from.

Because of his likeability as a man, and because more people associated him with management in the modern era, it could slightly be overlooked what a magnificent forward he was for Liverpool, Hamburg, Southampton, Newcastle United and England. I was only 13 when he was in his pomp at Liverpool but to watch him occasionally on TV, partnering John Toshack, this stocky, quick, hard-working and brave forward, capable of the most flamboyant finishes, headers, volleys, goals that pay the rent, was thrilling.

When he came on against Spain in Bilbao at the 1982 World Cup, the belief was that he would score, Keegan would rescue England. He headed wide and England headed home. It was crushing. But it was clear that he had played through the pain barrier simply to get on the pitch. Typical Keegan. Sacrifice was embedded in his DNA. Selflessness. It's why so many feel such personal loss at his passing. RIP.

Full tribute on page 22

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

Infantino's most costly error yet

How FIFA president Gianni Infantino's proposal to sell-off football's crown jewels triggered a civil war among the football fraternity, and may yet lead to his own downfall

Little did Folarin Balogun know, when he accidentally trod on Tarik Muharemovic, that his red card would prove the pebble whose ripples would surge into a wave undermining the FIFA president.

The United States striker was sent off, contentiously, in the 2-0 win over Bosnia & Herzegovina. This prompted Donald Trump to "suggest" to arch-sycophant Gianni Infantino that the automatic suspension be reviewed. Such blatant political interference irked even some of Infantino's most loyal acolytes. FIFA obediently delayed the suspension but the furore took the wind out of US sails and fired Belgium to a 4-1 win in the last 16.

The storm over interference in the finals by the US president soon fell back into the litany of oddities that decorate World Cup history.

Now football knows the backdrop, featuring a far more sinister match played out by a tightly-knit coterie of bankers, investors and lawyers. The greater goal was signing up favoured investors to capture the World Cup and mortgage it into the forever future. Thrive Eternal would be the lead investor, headed by Joshua Kushner, brother of Trump's son-in-law Jared.

Just nine days after the final so Infantino's World Cup sell-off was exposed and suddenly the penny dropped. The Balogun incident was no one-off; Infantino and the Trump milieu had been much more closely entwined than even his most virulent critics had suspected.

Not only that, but more tightly bound than FIFA's own senior executives and the six confederation presidents ever knew.

The Americanisation of the 2026 World Cup – all that razzmatazz, overbearing stadium announcers, dynamic ticket pricing, commercially-extended hydration breaks, celebrity cutaways and the final half-time show – was not to everyone's taste. But every World Cup must bend to the culture of the nation that has invested many millions of whatever currency in the staging.

Time to say goodbye?... FIFA president Gianni Infantino has come under heavy scrutiny

What was not acceptable was for the president of FIFA himself to ingratiate himself so deeply as to propose a secret sell-off of football's crown jewels. Infantino had been lambasted for his sycophantic behaviour around Trump. Now, laid bare by the outstanding journalism of Martyn Ziegler in *The Times*, was just how deeply Infantino had sold himself to the market.

The idea was to hive off into a subsidiary known as FIFA Forward Enterprise (FFE) sectors such as tournament organisation, media and sponsorship rights, ticketing and hospitality. FIFA proposed raising $4.2 billion from investors buying a stake of about 20%, based on an equity valuation of $20bn. The hook to persuade FAs to sign up was an immediate $20 million each for the next four-year cycle, rising to $22m through 2034 and $24m to 2038.

How FIFA would ensure the honest and worthy investment of such sums was not specified.

Thus, Infantino's underhanded egotism plunged FIFA into the most profound crisis in its history. His sell-out project betrayed the emotional investment of millions of supporters around the planet.

Infantino, deploying his own personal media crew, scurried to catch up with a scandal that had raced beyond his control. First came the furious reaction of UEFA: "This crosses a line that football's governing institutions should never cross," it said. "The World Cup is not for sale. It is both irresponsible and indefensible that a proposal of such significance for football was conceived in secret," European football's governing body continued, before deploying the nuclear option of a World Cup boycott.

Next, suitably emboldened by Europe, came rejections from all 41 member associations of CONCACAF, and then, the following day, the Asian Football Confederation said it "stands in solidarity" with them. Another day saw senior adviser to Infantino, Carlos

Cordeiro (ex-US Soccer Federation president), resign citing "a bad deal for football" that would "mortgage football's future," while remarkably Kevin Lamour, FIFA's own chief operating officer, said the governing body's own administration had been "deceived" about the project.

Within hours, New York rumours suggested Kushner and underwriting banker JP Morgan had walked away. Hence Infantino did a U-turn and scrapped the controversial plans.

Priority was to save the job to which he had expected unopposed re-election next March for a further four years. Maybe too late already as UEFA, CONCACAF and the AFC all fulminated about governance failures.

UEFA were particularly damning, criticising "secret schemes...cooked up by faceless individuals" and a "shabby, back room, opaque deal," before declaring no confidence in Infantino's leadership. CONCACAF followed suit: "This recent unilateral and egregious act of poor governance and leadership follows a pattern of missteps and similar behaviour. A comprehensive reckoning with this presidency is imperative."

Who might step up, and, more pertinently, what could be done about the sloppy system that allows a FIFA president to go rogue? Simply replacing this particular president is not enough and time is too short to rebuild before congress next year.

Possible initial candidates include Victor Montagliani, Canadian head of CONCACAF, and Asia's Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa who lost out to Infantino in 2016. Nasser Al Khelaifi, president of Paris Saint-Germain and head of European Football Clubs is another name to be floated.

Lars-Christer Olsson, former UEFA general secretary, has suggested the primacy of FIFA president be removed by rotating the role between the heads of the six confederations. This would appear to have UEFA's backing.

Infantino came out fighting. At a hastily arranged meeting of the FIFA management board in Rabat, Morocco, he apologised for his "errors", with the board maintaining its support for their president, saying "mistakes made were acknowledged" and that the "process should have been handled differently."

And Infantino is still not without his backers outside of FIFA's walls – creating something of a civil war among the football fraternity. South America's CONMEBOL said it would reject any attempt to oust him without a vote involving all 211 member nations, while the Argentina Football Association has been gushing in its praise of him. The Mexican Football Federation has broken ranks with CONCACAF to come out in support, while CAF said that it "unanimously reconfirmed its support for Infantino and thanked him for his support for African football over the years." Dissenting members within Asia – including Bhutan, the Philippines, Indonesia, the UAE and influential Qatar – have also backed him.

> Infantino's sell-out project betrayed the emotional investment of millions of supporters around the planet

If Infantino is to face a presidential challenge next March, a candidate must be found sooner rather than later – the deadline for announcing one's intention to stand is November.

If UEFA put someone forward, they will hope to choose more wisely than last time. In 2016, Infantino had been perceived as a safe fall-back candidate after the defenestration of Sepp Blatter and Michel Platini. UEFA expected this Swiss son of working-class Italian immigrants would be duly grateful and subservient. How wrong they were.

All Infantino's career has involved expansion and enrichment. As UEFA's general secretary he oversaw the European Championship extension from 16 to 24 teams, plus lucrative centralisation of television rights for national team qualifiers. At FIFA his regime launched a fattened-up Club World Cup and lifted World Cup access from 32 to 48 teams and almost certainly 64 for 2030.

He has explored private equity deals before, infamously the proposal in 2018 to sell off a slice of FIFA's commercial rights to the Japanese conglomerate SoftBank, blocked in FIFA Council by those awkward Europeans. Then there was the ill-fated proposal for a World Cup every two years.

Infantino could not have avoided spinning into Trump's orbit. He could and should, however, have avoided seduction by all those dollar signs.

Folarin Balogun's foul on Tarik Muharemovic...."the pebble whose ripples would surge into a wave"

BOOKS THIS MONTH

BACK AT LAST
How Coventry City Finally Returned to the Premier League
By Richard Chamberlain (Pitch Publishing, £19.99)

Back At Last tells the story of Coventry City's long-awaited return to the Premier League after 25 years away. From relegation and exile to a record-breaking Championship title win under Frank Lampard, this is the inside account of the season that brought the Sky Blues back to the big time.

THE GREATEST RIVALRY
Arsenal, Manchester United and the Battle that Defined an Era
By Dominic Hougham (Pitch Publishing, £16.99)

The Greatest Rivalry revisits the thrilling Arsenal v Manchester United battles of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Packed with classic matches, world-class players, controversies, quotes and drama, it is a chronicle of two great managers and two great teams fighting for supremacy. A must-read for all fans of that golden era.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Milan's cornerstone

How Franco Baresi provided the foundations for Arrigo Sacchi's great Milan side

When Silvio Berlusconi appointed Arrigo Sacchi to be manager of Milan in 1987 he was taking an enormous risk. Sacchi had never been a professional player. He had never managed in Serie A. His main achievement to that point had been putting Milan out of the Coppa Italia with Parma. But more than that, he was a revolutionary. Most of Italian football was still based around *il gioco all'italiana*, a development of *catenaccio* that involved some zonal marking. Sacchi went far further. He believed in a pure zonal system, a flat back four and a high offside line with a hard press.

Critics in the media said it couldn't possibly work and when Milan lost their second game of the season at home to Fiorentina, drew with Cesena in their third, and then suffered an away defeat to Sporting Gijon in the UEFA Cup, they seemed vindicated. The first crisis passed but Sacchi was worried he was pushing his players too hard as he drilled them to learn his methods; they had to be persuaded that their positioning was not laid down by ancient custom, some set idea of where the *regista* or the *tornante* should go, but was constantly to be renegotiated, defined by four factors: the ball, the space, the team-mate and the opponent.

So Sacchi eased back, only to receive a knock on his office door. It was the team's captain, Franco Baresi. Baresi asked what Sacchi was doing. The players, he said, had to learn the new system so thoroughly that their positioning became instinctive. For Sacchi this was a vital moment: Baresi wasn't just the captain, he had grown to become the moral heart of the team. And if he was on board with the revolution, the rest would follow.

So Sacchi redoubled his efforts and, in a glorious three-year spell, Milan won Serie A and then twice lifted the European Cup. But more than that, they played a style of football that thrilled the world and changed the game. Sacchi had been inspired by the Total Football of the Dutch of the early 1970s and is the tactical bridge who carried the ideas to Germany, to Helmut Gross, Wolfgang Frank, Volker Finke, Ralf Rangnick and, ultimately, Jurgen Klopp.

Baresi, who died in July at the age of 66, was key to that. He was an unusual type of defender, one who perhaps benefited from emerging in a country where playing with a *libero* was the default. It didn't matter that he was only 5ft 9in, which might have counted against him had he been expected to be a man-marker. It wouldn't be true to say he wasn't a physical player because he was quite prepared to nibble around a forward's ankles – Gianfranco Zola, for instance, spoke of the need to soak his feet in iced water after a game against Baresi – but he was

> Baresi's skill was as a reader of the game, forever stepping in front of a forward, holding him off, and then clipping a ball forward

Milan legend... Franco Baresi

Serial winner... Baresi won 17 major trophies with Milan

not an obviously imposing presence who was going to win every header by dint of his size. His skill was as a reader of the game, forever stepping in front of a forward, holding him off, and then either clipping a ball forward or distributing it sideways.

Asked if he could teach others how to read the game, he shrugged: he had no idea, he said, it just came naturally. That perhaps explains how he made his mark so young. His elder brother was at Internazionale when he went there for a trial aged 14. But Inter were worried about his size and so asked him to come back the following year to see how he'd grown. Irritated, Baresi joined the club he claimed he'd always supported, Milan.

By the age of 18, he was an ever-present as Milan won the league under Nils Liedholm, who had begun to move away from the traditional Italian style. Baresi, with his innate ability to read the game, was ideal for his system.

Sacchi always felt Liedholm didn't go far enough. One of Sacchi's main challenges was persuading celebrity players to sacrifice themselves for the system. "I convinced [Ruud] Gullit and [Marco] Van Basten by telling them that five organised players would beat ten disorganised ones," he said. "And I proved it to them.

"I took five players: Giovanni Galli in goal, [Mauro] Tassotti, [Paolo] Maldini, [Alessandro] Costacurta and Baresi. They had ten players: Gullit, Van Basten, [Frank] Rijkaard, [Pietro Paolo] Virdis, [Alberico] Evani, [Carlo] Ancelotti, [Angelo] Colombo, [Roberto] Donadoni, [Christian] Lantignotti and [Graziano] Mannari. They had 15 minutes to score against my five players. The only rule was that if we won possession or they lost the ball, they had to start over from ten metres inside their own half. I did this all the time and they never scored. Not once."

Baresi and his ability to organise and to anticipate danger were key to that. He was central to the Sacchi revolution not only because of his own ability, but because the example he set and his capacity to inspire others.

Full obituary on page 20

The month in numbers

Eye-catching facts and stats from the world of football this month...

€376m

Career transfer fees accumulated by Belgium striker Romelu Lukaku after he joined Turkish giants Fenerbahce for €6m from Napoli.

3

West African countries – Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – that have joined forces to submit a joint bid to host the AFCON finals in 2032.

2030

Year that Mauricio Pochettino's contract with the United States national team will expire after the Argentine head coach signed a new deal until the next World Cup.

42

Seasons that veteran striker Kazuyoshi Miura has played in after kicking off the new campaign on loan at Fukushima United from Yokohama FC in the Japanese third tier.

25.1%

The stake in Championship club West Ham United that former Newcastle United investor Amanda Stavely has agreed to purchase.

3

Scottish players to have joined Sevilla after the Spanish side signed ex-Rangers striker Robbie Ure for an initial £5.5 million from Swedish runaway league leaders IK Sirius.

£30m

Fee paid by Fulham to sign Shea Charles from Southampton, making the midfielder the most expensive Northern Irish footballer of all time.

42,715

Crowd that attended Gotham FC's NWSL clash against Washington Spirit to see the return of Australia striker Sam Kerr – the largest-ever attendance for a women's sporting event in New York City *(more on page 91)*.

20

Months of his four-year doping ban that Chelsea and Ukraine winger Mykhailo Mudryk served before the FA cleared his return to football.

Back in action... Mykhailo Mudryk returned in pre-season

Still going strong... Luka Modric

41

Age that Luka Modric will turn in September. The Croatian has signed a one-year contract extension with Milan, and is expected to retire from international duty in October.

50

Number of Brazilian players to sign for Shakhtar Donetsk in the Ukrainian side's history after they agreed a €9m deal to capture Ryan Roberto from Flamengo.

£115.7m

Fee paid by Real Madrid to sign 19-year-old Ivory Coast winger Yan Diomande from RB Leipzig, making him the most expensive African footballer of all time.

44

Appearances that Lucas Digne made for Paris Saint-Germain between 2013 and 2015, before returning to the French club from Aston Villa this summer for £8.5m.

$6bn

Valuation of Liverpool according to a consortium, which includes Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, that is in talks to purchase a 30% stake in the Premier League club.

7

Clubs that 22-year-old Colombia striker Jhon Duran has signed for during his career after joining Benfica on a season-long loan from Saudi Arabian outfit Al Nassr.

4

English players to have signed for Italian giants Internazionale after John Stones followed in the footsteps of Gerry Hitchens, Ashley Young and Paul Ince by joining the Serie A champions.

£150m

Transfer income that West Ham United have banked this summer by selling trio Mateus Fernandes (to Tottenham Hotspur), Crysencio Summerville (Al Hilal) and Freddie Potts (Club Brugge).

"When I left Real Madrid, I signed to go to Manchester United…to lose the chance to succeed Sir Alex Ferguson was dramatic, but I don't regret [it] because it was a decision that I made with my heart"

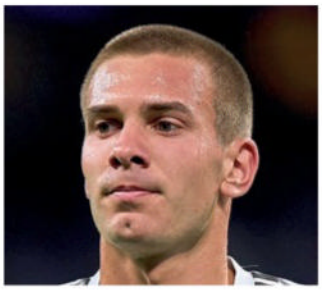
Jose Mourinho reveals he was close to taking over at Manchester United in 2013 before changing his mind and re-joining Chelsea

12 MOVES *you might have missed…*

TRANSFERS ★ LOANS ★ SACKINGS ★ HIRINGS ★ SWITCHES ★ RETIREMENTS

Thiago ALMADA

After 18 months in Europe with Lyon and Atletico Madrid, Almada was signed by **River Plate**, along with his fellow 2022 World Cup winners Angel Correa and Nicolas Otamendi.



Franco MASTANTUONO

Signed by Real Madrid last year as one of the most exciting young players in the world, the Argentina playmaker, 19, joined Italian outfit **Fiorentina** on a season-long loan.

Ismael BENNACER

After a series of injuries, the 2021-22 *Scudetto*-winning midfielder – who was Player of the Tournament when Algeria won the AFCON in 2019 – was released by **Milan**, aged 28.

Julian BRANDT

Released by Borussia Dortmund at the start of the summer, the Germany winger, 30, joined **Ajax** – and scored on his Eredivisie debut for the Amsterdam giants.

Alexis SANCHEZ

The Chile legend, 37, called time on an 18-year career in European football, leaving Sevilla in order to join Canadian side **CF Montreal** in Major League Soccer.

Sebastien HALLER

The Ivory Coast striker and 2023 AFCON winner joined the eighth club of his career after leaving Dutch side Utrecht and signing for J.League outfit **Sanfrecce Hiroshima**.

Javier HERNANDEZ

More than seven months after leaving Chivas, the former Mexico striker joined **Atletico Dallas** who will play in the USL Championship, the second tier of US football.

Sergi ROBERTO

The Barcelona academy graduate, 34, who has spent the past two campaigns in Serie A with Como, joined Major League Soccer giants **LA Galaxy** on a free transfer.

Diego FORLAN

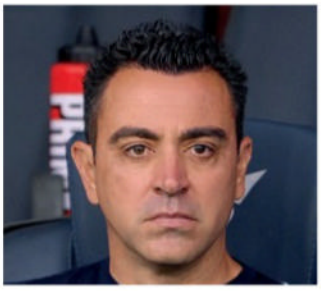
The **Uruguay** legend, who scored 36 goals in 112 appearances for his country, was appointed as interim coach for this autumn's friendlies following the exit of Marcelo Bielsa.

BUBISTA

Cape Verde's coach stepped down to join Moroccan club **RS Berkane**. Elsewhere, Pitso Mosimane took charge of South Africa again, and Ivory Coast re-hired Herve Renard.

Roberto MANCINI

Mancini was reappointed by **Italy**, five years after leading them to the Euros. Claudio Ranieri is their new technical director with Gianfranco Zola in as youth team co-ordinator.



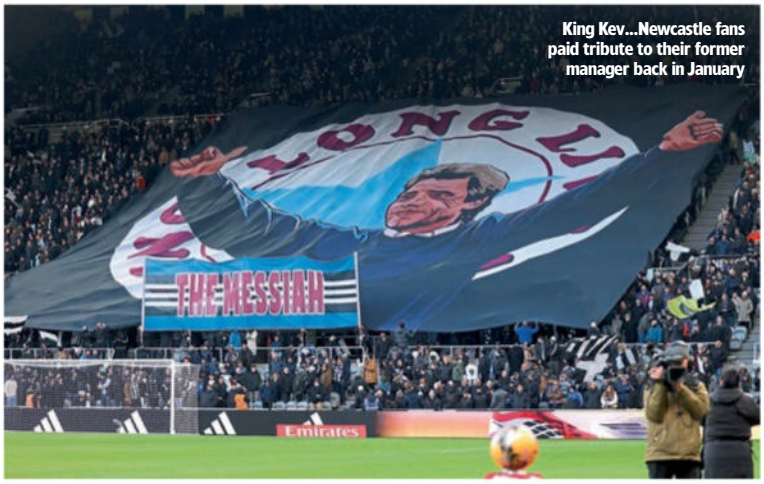
XAVI Hernandez

Netherlands also found their new manager, with former Barcelona head coach Xavi taking charge. *(More on the new international managers next month)*.

"You protected me when I was a child, you guided me as a boy and you inspired me as a man. You were the strongest footballer I ever had the honour of playing with. We will miss you, Captain"

Paolo Maldini pays tribute to his former team-mate, Franco Baresi

OBITUARIES



King Kev...Newcastle fans paid tribute to their former manager back in January

Kevin KEEGAN (1951-2026)
England's finest player in the 1970s, twice European Footballer of the Year, winner of ten major prizes with Liverpool and Hamburg. England captain in 31 of his 63 internationals, scoring 21 goals. Later managed Newcastle United (twice), England, Fulham and Manchester City *(full tribute on page 22).*

Wieslaw GRABOWSKI (1955-2026)
Coaching assistant under Jacek Gmoch with Poland at the 1978 World Cup and later head coach of Zambia in 1983-84 and Zimbabwe in 2002.

David OWORI (1998-2026)
Uganda international midfielder, who most recently starred at club level for record national domestic champions SC Villa. Tragically killed after being attacked near his home.

John FARLEY (1951-2026)
Affectionately known as "Charlie", Farley was a winger for Middlesbrough, Stockton, Watford, Halifax Town, Hull City, Wolverhampton Wanderers, Bury and Blackpool in the 1970s.

Germain BERTHE (1993-2026)
Mali goalkeeper who won seven caps, including appearances at the 2015 Africa Cup of Nations, and club honours with Horoya AC and Real Bamako.

Erwin VANDENDAELE (1945-2026)
Redoubtable Belgium central defender or defensive midfielder, winning 32 caps between 1970 and 1977. German-born Vandendaele played nearly 300 games for Club Brugge, winning the Belgian league title once and domestic cup twice before achieving more success at Anderlecht with whom he won the European Cup Winners' Cup twice, two more Belgian Cups and the Paris tournament. Belgian Footballer of the Year in 1971 and a cornerstone in defence when hosts Belgium finished third in the Euros the following year. Had short spells later with Reims in France and back home with Gent.

Paul BRADSHAW (1953-2026)
A promising winger with Burnley and Sheffield Wednesday during the 1970s, forced to retire early at the age of 25 due to injury.

Phil PARKES (1947-2026)
Long-serving Wolverhampton Wanderers goalkeeper, playing over 300 games for the club between 1964 and 1978, before ending his career with a host of North American clubs.

Osvaldo BAGNOLI (1935-2026)
Italian coach whose greatest success was guiding Hellas Verona to their shock Serie A title triumph in 1984-85 during his nine years in charge. They led virtually all season, conceding only 19 goals in 30 games. Later led Genoa to fourth place and the semi-finals of the UEFA Cup and was a Serie A runner-up with Inter. Earlier a journeyman midfielder with Milan, Verona, Udinese, SPAL, Catanzaro and Verbania.

Milan legend... Franco Baresi

Mali midfielder... Kalilou Traore at the 2013 AFCON

Hall of famer... Osvaldo Bagnoli was recognised by the Italian Football Federation in 2018

Seppo SAIRANEN (1952-2026)
Goalkeeper who played six times for Finland between 1979 and 1980 and was a league champion in 1983 with Ilves. Totalled 150 league matches over eight seasons. Later had two spells as coach of FC Jazz.

Franco BARESI (1960-2026)
Legendary Italian defender and captain of Arrigo Sacchi's great Milan side of the 1980s and '90s *(full tribute on page 20).*

Manfred MANGLITZ (1940-2026)
Outstanding goalkeeper in the 1960s with Bayer Leverkusen, MSV Duisburg and Cologne. Made history as the first-ever goalkeeper to score a goal in the Bundesliga with a penalty while playing for MSV Duisburg against Borussia Monchengladbach in June 1967. A reserve at the 1970 World Cup he played only four times for West Germany because of the dominance of Wolfgang Fahrian, Hans Tilkowski, Horst Wolter and then Sepp Maier.

Cristino CENTURION (1954-2026)
Argentine-born Paraguay midfielder of eight caps who switched international allegiance on joining Guarani in 1976. Also played for Colombia's Deportes Tolima and Deportivo Cali, and briefly in Belgium with Anderlecht before returning to Paraguay with Sol de America and Olimpia.

Kalilou TRAORE (1987-2026)
Rangy central midfielder who made 16 appearances, scoring once, for Mali between 2010 and 2013 when he helped the Eagles to third place at the Africa Cup of Nations. Peripatetic club career with spells at Real Bamako, Morocco's Wydad Casablanca and Hassania Agadir, Istra 1961 (Croatia), OB (Denmark) and Sochaux (France).

Achito VIVAS (1934-2026)
Called up by coach Adolfo Pedernera as Colombia's goalkeeping reserve to Efrain Sanchez at the 1962 World Cup in Chile. Did not win the first of his four caps until the following year. Played most of his career with Deportivo Pereira as well as Atletico Nacional, Junior, Quindio, Tolima and Once Caldas.

Words by Keir Radnedge & Jamie Evans

Little One

Franco Baresi's death was mourned not only by Italian football but around the world

Words: Keir Radnedge

Ruud Gullit and Marco van Basten provided the attacking panache for the magnificent Milan fashioned by Arrigo Sacchi and enhanced by Fabio Capello, but the cornerstone was Franco Baresi.

When Nils Liedholm first saw the teenage Baresi in the youth set-up he had no doubt: "The new Beckenbauer is coming from our Primavera."

Baresi may have lacked the imaginative finesse of Beckenbauer but he was the better defender, sure-footed in the last-ditch tackles and interceptions and surprisingly commanding in the air despite standing only 5ft 9in.

He was not a shouter, quite the opposite. But in his own way, Baresi left neither team-mates nor opponents in doubt about his opinions on the pitch and in the dressing room. If ever a man may be categorised as leading by example, then Baresi was that man.

Baresi's 719 appearances for his only club (33 goals, including one hat-trick) accrued 17 major trophies: six Serie A titles, three European Cups/Champions Leagues, two Intercontinental Cups, two European Super Cups and four Italian Super Cups. He was also a World Cup winner – although his misadventure in the 1994 final has long overshadowed his membership, albeit non-playing, of Enzo Bearzot's triumphant squad in Spain in 1982.

That 1994 World Cup remained his enduring regret. Baresi recovered from knee surgery in 25 days, in time for the final against Brazil but then missed his penalty (as would Roberto Baggio) in the shootout defeat. Ultimately he ended his career with one goal in 81 *Azzurri* caps.

Franchino and elder brother Giuseppe (Beppe) played their first organised football for a local oratory team in Travagliato, 50 miles east of Milan. The boys were only 14 and 16 when they were orphaned after the deaths of first their mother then their father. Coach Guido Settembrino, keeping a promise to their mother, took them to Internazionale for trials.

Inter took Beppe but thought Franco too small, unlike Milan. They nicknamed him "*Piscinin*" (Little One) but he proved a giant in spending 15 years of his 20-year senior career as captain.

Swedish maestro Liedholm handed Baresi his Serie A debut, not yet 18, against Verona on April 23, 1978. The following season his talents earned him a starting role in defensive midfield and he remained loyal, despite lucrative offers, through the turbulence of relegation in 1980 and 1982.

Everything changed for the better in 1987 after the club's rescue by Silvio Berlusconi and subsequent appointment of Sacchi as coach.

Sacchi transformed Baresi into a new-age sweeper. He commanded a rock-like backline and offside trap featuring a mixture of Mauro Tassotti, Filippo Galli, Alessandro Costacurta and Paolo Maldini. Baresi also took opponents off-balance by his bursts forward to help manoeuvre attacks out of midfield. They all went marching on after Capello succeeded Sacchi in 1991; in 1993-94 Milan conceded a record low 15 goals in 34 league games.

Defenders rarely win individual prizes but Baresi came close in 1989 as runner-up to Van Basten for European Footballer of the Year. Later Baresi recalled: "Not a problem, just finishing behind Van Basten was like beating him because in those years he was like Messi."

Milan retired Baresi's No.6 shirt after his exit in 1997. He had a brief three months in English football on the coaching staff of Jean Tigana at Fulham before being welcomed back with open arms at Milan. In 2000, he was hailed Footballer of the Century by the Italian players' association and Milan fans voted him *Milanista* of the Century, ahead of Gianni Rivera, Gunnar Nordahl and Liedholm.

As Berlusconi once aptly said of Baresi: "The greatest, a fantastic player, a man of incredible honesty, loved and respected by everyone, even his opponents."

Italia '90...Baresi at the 1990 World Cup

King Kev

Kevin Keegan was a footballing superstar who never forgot his roots

Words: Keir Radnedge

Kevin Keegan, six years retired in December 1990, was a substitute on one of the all-star teams in Peter Shilton's White Hart Lane testimonial. Repeatedly he urged the coaches to send him on so he could score with a diving header. Eventually he went on as substitute for Gary Lineker and, sure enough, darted to the edge of the six-yard box to accomplish just that.

By then, Keegan was 39 and working only to improve his golf swing in Marbella. But the incident epitomised both his enduring love of the game and the competitive intensity that had fuelled his journey from miner's cottage to international superstar.

Later would come the managerial adventures and misadventures, which mesmerised the media. Yet Keegan's status and fame beyond football owed everything to a playing career built on ambition, dedication and sheer hard work.

His era was very different from today's footballing landscape. No satellite television, no social media, no round-the-clock live TV football. By contrast with the 20-year careers of a Messi or Ronaldo, Keegan's trophy-winning span lasted a mere seven seasons. Yet his explosion from Fourth-Division youngster to Anfield's King Kev was ideally timed, accidentally, just as George Best's star was starting to fade.

Keegan was a natural magnet for sponsors discovering sports stars as perfect marketing tools. Keegan promoted everything from boots and sportswear to aftershave and ice-lollies while also fronting a road safety campaign and making pop records. Everyone wanted a slice of Special K thanks to his achievements out on the pitch.

Joseph Kevin Keegan had been born on St Valentine's Day, 1951, in Armthorpe, a pit village near Doncaster. His father, also Joe, was a devoted fan of Newcastle United. Young Kevin may not have inherited a Geordie accent but he was imbued with tales of Hughie Gallacher and Jackie Milburn, which would one day transform him into a regional football messiah.

Keegan was playing for a local works team when his potential was first recognised – up to a point. A trial with Coventry City was cut short because he was considered too small but fourth-tier Scunthorpe United were not so choosy. Keegan spent three seasons honing his trade on mud-heap pitches against rugged defenders before a string of happy coincidences brought him to Liverpool and the inspirational Bill Shankly.

That was in 1971 and Liverpool, after their revival in the early 1960s, had won nothing for five years. Shankly was casting anew. In May, the Scot paid Scunthorpe £33,000 for their star man, and Keegan took instantly to the stage. No season's adaptation in the reserves. Within three months he had made a goalscoring debut against Nottingham Forest.

Formally, Keegan wore No.7 and started matches at outside-right. But Shankly gave him freedom to roam and "drop a few hand grenades." Later, Shankly said: "Kevin Keegan wasn't just a player, he was an inspiration. He could light up a city."

Keegan was quick, nimble, hyper-active, industrious and surprisingly effective in the air, an outstanding individual and a generous team-mate. His telepathic partnership with towering Wales centre-forward John Toshack sparked a glorious two decades at Anfield that stretched far beyond their departures.

In 1972-73, Keegan scored twice in the first leg of the UEFA Cup final against Borussia Monchengladbach to deliver Liverpool's first European trophy, alongside the First Division title. A year later he struck two fine goals in a 3-0 FA Cup final demolition of Newcastle. In his first five seasons at Anfield, initially under Shankly and subsequently Bob Paisley, Keegan won two league titles, two UEFA Cups and that one FA Cup.

A relentless inner drive for the next adventure was revealed at the start of his sixth season, the 1976-77 campaign, when Keegan announced his intention of leaving at term's end to test himself in Europe. His stock with the Kop was never the same again. To accept a big offer out of the blue would have been one thing, a premeditated exit was something else.

Another league title was added to the trophy room, but Keegan's Anfield career reached its climax in Boy's Own fashion. His last competitive match was the European Cup final in Rome against Borussia Monchengladbach. Keegan ran the legs off Gladbach skipper Berti Vogts and won the crucial late penalty that sealed Liverpool's 3-1 triumph, their first European Cup.

Hamburg had just won the European Cup Winners' Cup and saw Keegan as the ideal weapon to overthrow Liverpool as European champions. Unfortunately idiosyncratic general manager Peter Krohn eulogised Keegan to such an extent that his new team-mates instantly took against him. It did not help that Keegan arrived with no knowledge of

Captain Keegan... the England skipper celebrates a goal against Scotland in May 1979

German; he and his team-mates failed to communicate in football terms on the pitch or linguistically off it.

Oddly, it was only when results slumped after Keegan was sent off and suspended that common sense took over. The fans were already on board, nicknaming Keegan "*Mächtige Maus*" ("Mighty Mouse"), Gunter Netzer arrived as sports director and Hamburg won their first German championship in 19 years. Keegan scored 17 goals while also winning the Ballon d'Or as European Footballer of the Year in 1978 and 1979, a feat unmatched by any other English footballer.

Hamburg were favourites to win the European Cup in 1980. Once more, the final was Keegan's last game for his club but this time without the fairy-tale ending; Hamburg dominated possession against Nottingham Forest in Madrid but lost 1-0.

Keegan was tempted by Juventus, but these were Italy's "Years of Lead," an era defined by political violence, street clashes, bombings, kidnappings and assassinations. By now Keegan and his wife Jean had one baby and she would not countenance such a risky move. Instead, Keegan generated another headline-grabbing transfer by returning to English football with Southampton.

Lawrie McMenemy was one of the major managerial personalities at the time and Keegan believed Saints, with

Bundesliga star...Keegan won two Ballons d'Or during his time with Hamburg

their partnership, could rival the best in the land. That, however, proved to be a misjudgement. In 1982, he embarked on an even more remarkable twist with a Newcastle United becalmed in the Second Division.

Keegan's arrival electrified not only the club but the whole city. A goal on his debut against Queens Park Rangers was the first of 49 in 85 games. He captained the Magpies back to the First Division before making a dramatic exit into retirement, whisked away by helicopter after a farewell match against Liverpool in 1984.

His international standing was all the more remarkable in that Keegan's career spanned one of the gloomiest chapters in the history of the England national team.

Keegan was called up initially in the closing days of Sir Alf Ramsey's tenure and thus missed out on the 1974 and 1978 World Cups following England's failure to qualify. A back injury meant he played only 30 minutes off the bench in the 1982 finals, the dire goalless draw against Spain that spelled elimination for Ron Greenwood's team. He even missed a headed chance to score the winner late on; a match-fit Keegan would have allowed no such mistake.

His 63rd cap proved his last. Keegan had scored 21 goals and captained England 31 times but the new season brought a new manager in Bobby Robson who omitted him without even the courtesy of a farewell phone call.

Over the next four years, Keegan generated a remarkable transformation at St James' Park. His team played a brand of romantic, attacking football which thrilled fans, brought promotion, a third-place finish in their first Premier League season and the memorable 1995-96 duel with Manchester United. Newcastle were pipped to the title after blowing a 12-point lead. Keegan's famous, heart-on-his-sleeve TV rant – "I will love it if we beat them! Love it!" – remained one of TV sport's most memorable clips.

Later he would achieve promotions with Fulham and Manchester City before, finally and most painfully, failing to re-conjure the earlier magic at Newcastle. In a duel over who wielded the power, owners or manager, Keegan's belief in his own status proved self-defeatingly naive.

> "Kevin Keegan wasn't just a player, he was an inspiration. He could light up a city"
>
> Bill Shankly

That ever-infectious enthusiasm, in between Fulham and City, had even brought Keegan the England job. Only for 20 months. The Euro 2000 finals ended in group-stage failure before Keegan quit four months later, in the toilets, after a World Cup qualifier against Germany. A 1-0 defeat brought down the curtain on both the old Wembley and Keegan's reign. This time he had to concede he was not up to the job.

Keegan's retirement two years later to Marbella and his commercial projects could never have satisfied his inner drive for long. He returned to England in 1991 and immediately questioned the wisdom of the move after he was beaten up by a bunch of opportunist thugs while taking a roadside nap. It was the second such assault of Keegan's life; while on tour with England in May 1974 he had been battered in Belgrade by airport security who mistook him for an English hooligan.

The return home meant Keegan was ready, available and only too willing to dive back into football in February 1992 as manager of his father's beloved Newcastle United.

Down but not out. Keegan soon bounced back. Even after the second Newcastle denouement he remained the ambitious, self-willed product of the mining community who escaped through natural talent, commitment and diligence; a footballing king who never lost the common touch.

Anfield hero... Keegan scored 100 goals in 323 games for Liverpool

"I will love it if we beat them! Love it!"...Keegan as Newcastle boss during the 1995-96 season

eye witness

Jamie Evans reports

POLAND

Return of Wisla Krakow adds to exciting Ekstraklasa

It's over an hour until kick-off and Wisla Krakow's Henryk Reyman Stadium is already more than half full. The ultras have arrived early to tune up ahead of the opening match of the 2026-27 Ekstraklasa season. But when you've waited four years for something, another 60 minutes aren't much.

Wisla are one of the most successful clubs in Polish football history, yet in 2022 were relegated to the second tier. For a team with 14 league titles to their name – only Legia Warsaw, with 15, have won more – it has been a humbling few years. Even the joy of winning the Polish Cup in 2024 was tempered by finishing tenth in the second tier, their lowest-ever league position. That was sandwiched in between seasons that both ended in painful play-off defeats.

Finally, in 2025-26, they got their act together and won promotion as champions, finishing nine points clear of the competition.

"We were really upset that we got relegated four years ago and now we are amazed that we came back," Mateusz, a Wisla fan, tells *World Soccer* outside the ground. "So many games we lost against smaller teams, worse teams than us. The play-offs with Puszcza Niepolomice [in 2023] we lost 4-1, the play-offs with Miedz Legnica [in 2025] we lost 1-0. It was super painful.

"There were some happy moments like the Polish Cup final against Pogon Szczecin, and the last-second goal [Wisla won the game in extra-time after equalising in the ninth minute of second-half stoppage time]. So, ups and downs over the last four years but hopefully now things will be better."

After securing promotion, the celebrations were wild.

"It was a crazy night, the whole stadium on the pitch – we had a full 'Red River' on the pitch," adds Mateusz, a reference to the Wisla river that runs through Krakow, which gives the club its name.

"And then in the main square, 60,000 people celebrating like crazy, pyrotechnics, singing, clapping,

Henryk Reyman Stadium...inside Wisla's first game of the new season

caption to come ??????????????

everything. One of best memories as fans. Wisla is a special club."

Did the celebrations make the previous four years of struggle all worth it?

"It was a promotion, so it wasn't super big. But it was important for the younger fans like me because I don't remember the last championship, what it means to be a champion. Many fans of Wisla don't know how to be happy."

Despite the club's storied past, few supporters have particularly high expectations for the upcoming season. They're just happy to be back in the Ekstraklasa, and the consensus is that a mid-table finish will be more than adequate. It has been 15 years since their last top-flight title, and the many disappointments since then have left scars.

"We are not trying to have high expectations because it can be more painful if we don't reach them," admits Mateusz. "Mid-table would be nice for us, not being relegated would be really good this season. After a few years maybe we will fight for something."

That, however, doesn't detract from the excitement ahead of the clash with GKS Katowice. "The stadium was fully booked a month ago – 33,000 people will come here and be super, super loud," says Mateusz's friend Dymitr.

The complicated nature of relationships between Polish clubs, where alliances are just as common as rivalries, mean that this is a grudge match. Wisla are allied to Ruch Chorzow, who are the local rivals of GKS Katowice, which makes them rivals of Wisla. "Basically, they don't like each other," explains Angelika Gluszek from the Ekstraklasa media team – and that dislike is reflected in the volume of the stadium.

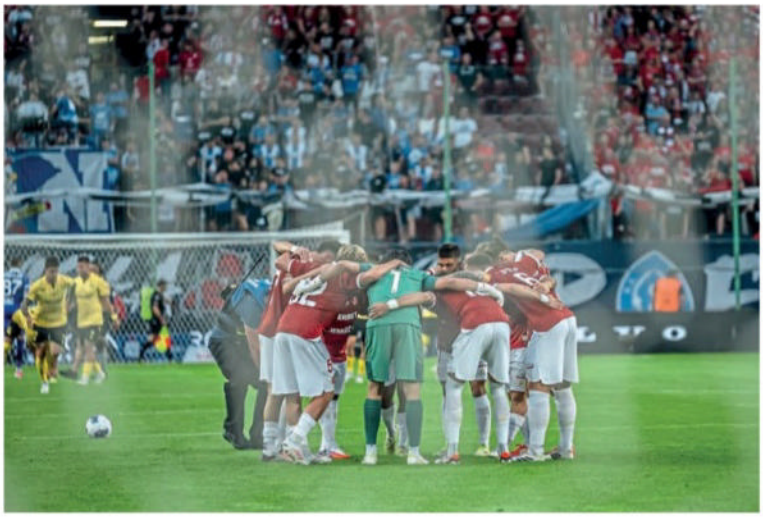
The Henryk Reyman Stadium (also known as the Synerise Arena for sponsorship reasons) has been Wisla's home since 1953. Between 2004 and 2011 it was completely rebuilt, but when the ultras are in full voice it rattles and hums as if it's been there for decades.

During the first half, the entertainment comes primarily from the stands rather than the pitch, with both sets of fans working through their repertoires of songs at deafening volumes, while Wisla's players look a little overawed by the occasion. When the half-time whistle blows, nothing separates the two sides.

★

There is, undoubtedly, something happening in Polish football at the moment. Not only at Wisla, although they will be prominent characters in the story of the 2026-27 season. Across the rest of the league, attendances, viewing figures and sponsorship revenues are all at a record-high. In short, more people are watching Polish football than ever before.

Why? Because of the league's ability to keep conjuring up stories. Everywhere you look, there is something interesting happening; stories like Lukas Podolski



Pre-match huddle...Wisla Krakow players get ready for the game against GKS Katowice

Ekstraklasa comeback...Wisla fans ahead of their first top-flight match for four seasons

ending his playing career at boyhood club Gornik Zabrze and then buying them immediately after retiring; coaches like Marek Papszun, the mastermind of Rakow Czestochowa's rise from the third tier to Polish champions, who has now been tasked with bringing the good times back to Legia Warsaw; or Adrian Siemieniec, who two years ago led Jagiellonia Bialystok to their first-ever league title at the age of 32.

The 2025-26 season demonstrated the Ekstraklasa's appeal. As late as April, every team in the league could still win the title or be relegated. In the end, Lechia Gdansk went down despite being the joint-highest scorers in the league alongside the champions, Lech Poznan. Only 26 points separated the entire league; to put that into context, last season there was a 25-point gap between Premier League champions Arsenal and fifth-placed Liverpool.

That was Lech's second title in a row, but the league has seen five different champions in the past eight years – including three first-time winners in Piast Gliwice, Rakow and Jagiellonia.

In an era when so many top-flight leagues are dominated by one or two clubs, the Ekstraklasa can rightly claim to be the most competitive league in the world – and it is not by chance.

"A couple of years ago we decided, with the clubs, to change our strategy," explains Marcin Animucki, the president of the league, to *World Soccer*. "We understood that we need to have more than one good club. So we made plenty of different moves including how the money is split, benefits for the European representatives in the scheduling. We said that we need to have four or even six clubs that can represent Ekstraklasa on a high level. And now we have one of the most competitive leagues in the world."

The recent rise of the Ekstraklasa began after perhaps its greatest test.

"Since COVID we have been one of the most dynamic leagues in Europe, maybe the world," continues Animucki. "We managed very well during COVID, we completed the tournament without any financial losers, we were one of the first leagues to bring fans back to the grounds, and from that time we have been growing.

More people are watching Polish football than ever before. Why? Because of the league's ability to keep conjuring up stories

"The attendance across all the stadiums went above two million, then three million, now four million. Hopefully this season it will be even higher."

If there is a missing ingredient from Polish football, it is in the development of young talent.

"We are working very heavily with the clubs but also with the FA to prepare clubs' youth development programmes," adds Animucki. The league, he says, is among the top ten in Europe for attendances, finances and coefficient, "but in 2024-25 we made €50 million in international transfers – this is 24th place in Europe. So, if we are in the top ten in those other dimensions, this is where we should be working harder."

And of course, it helps the league to have its biggest names involved again – like Wisla Krakow.

"We are very happy to have them back. They are champions, multi-time champions. We are happy to have this atmosphere, this full stadium, these emotions in the Ekstraklasa."

★

Back at the Henryk Reyman, the first half has given way to an action-packed second period.

Marko Bozic opens the scoring for Wisla from the penalty spot and for a period, the hosts are irresistible. The smoke from dozens of flares fills the summer night sky, and the Katowice defence is engulfed by maroon shirts, suffocated.

Memories of the glory years, of winning eight titles in 13 seasons between 1999 and 2011, come flooding back for the Red River. The first-half rustiness is long forgotten, the cautious optimism has given way to febrile ecstasy.

"Red River"...Wisla supporters invade the pitch to celebrate after last season's promotion

Ekstraklasa president... Marcin Animucki

A second goal soon follows, Spanish forward Jordi Sanchez heading home from close range, and the noise ratchets up another few decibels.

Moments later, Katowice's left-back falls victim to the atmosphere, mis-controlling the ball out of play under no pressure. From the resultant throw-in, Wisla have the ball in the net again, Sanchez bundling it home. The perfect return is unfolding as if they scripted it themselves.

But then comes the plot twist. Several minutes have passed since the goal was scored, but the game has not restarted, with Katowice captain Arkadiusz Jedrych down in his own six-yard box, injured in the act of trying to keep the ball out. The referee is beckoned over to the VAR monitor, where a foul on the defender by Wisla's Maxence Maisonneuve is revealed. The goal is chalked off, Wisla's advantage is reduced from three to two – and just like that, the spell is broken.

The momentum begins to turn. Katowice have suddenly discovered a foothold while Wisla find themselves staring over the precipice. Mateusz's pre-match concerns about raising expectation levels too high begins to feel highly prescient, and before long Wisla's advantage is reduced again, Szymon Bartlewicz converting from inside the box for the visitors. 2-1.

The home fans respond. But where the earlier noise was incessant and constant, now it is frequently interrupted by howls of relief when a cross is hacked clear or the ball drops the right side of the post.

When the full-time whistle finally does arrive, it is greeted by a grateful yet deafening roar. It has not been easy, but Wisla have won an Ekstraklasa match for the first time since April 2022.

A record-equalling 15th title will probably have to wait, but Wisla are just happy to be back where they belong: in Europe's most competitive and unpredictable league.

Engulfed...flares go off as Wisla take the lead

eyewitness

Alasdair Mackenzie reports

ITALY

The Lazio supporters willing to walk away

"We Lazio fans have had our dream taken away. We haven't been able to dream for 22 years, since Claudio Lotito took ownership of the club."

So begins the "letter to president Lotito", urging the long-time owner of the Roman club to sell up, which accompanied a petition with more than 45,000 signatures to it.

Lotito, a 69-year-old businessman and Italian senator, has owned Lazio for more than 20 years. But for the club's fanbase, the *Laziali*, his financial prudence and unfiltered communication style has hindered the team's progress for too long. For them, words were not enough to express their dissatisfaction.

Unsurprisingly, Lotito resisted calls to step aside. But what has followed since that petition has been impossible to ignore.

From late January until the end of the 2025-26 season, Lazio fans abandoned the Stadio Olimpico en masse for all but one game, as attendances plummeted from around 44,000 to closer to 5,000.

Eerie images of one of Italy's most iconic grounds being deserted by *Laziali* – even for a Coppa Italia semi-final against Atalanta and a Rome derby as the "away" team – quickly spread through social media as football fans from far and wide took notice.

Lotito has done little to appease his opponents, and things look unlikely to change for the 2026-27 season after fan groups announced their intention to continue the stadium boycott.

"We are fed up with the owner, he doesn't care," says lifelong Lazio supporter Vittorio, who joined the boycott last season and does not intend to renew his season ticket or attend any games in 2026-27.

"I think it's the most effective form of protest. Not money-wise, because Lazio doesn't get a lot of money out of season tickets and the stadium [owned by the Italian Olympic Committee], but the impact.

"I mean, everybody's talking about this, right? So, it's the image that makes people talk about this, not the money."

With a new season looming, Lotito's relationship with the club's supporters has never been worse.

Tensions have simmered throughout his tenure, despite the Roman businessman rescuing the club from the risk of bankruptcy when he took over in 2004 – just four years after a star-studded side had won the *Scudetto* – and famously quipped: "I took over this club at its funeral and brought it into an irreversible coma. Hopefully soon I can make it reversible."

Some *Laziali* still appreciate Lotito for saving the club, and his tenure has not been without success: the 2013 Coppa Italia final win over rivals Roma is regarded as one of the greatest moments in the club's history and is one of three Italian Cups won under Lotito, along with three Italian Super Cups and regular European football.

And while recent protests have appeared to unite most of the fans against him, Lotito does retain some support.

"I've been a season ticket holder since 1980 and will renew my season ticket this season," says Alessandro. "I've never supported the boycott.

"Fans have every right to protest, but no right or opportunity to influence the management or decisions of a football club.

"The situation has worsened mostly due to the poor results of the last two seasons. When things were going well, Lotito wasn't a serious problem."

Unfortunately for Lotito, the number of fans who see things like Alessandro have diminished during a damaging 12 months in which opposition against him has swelled.

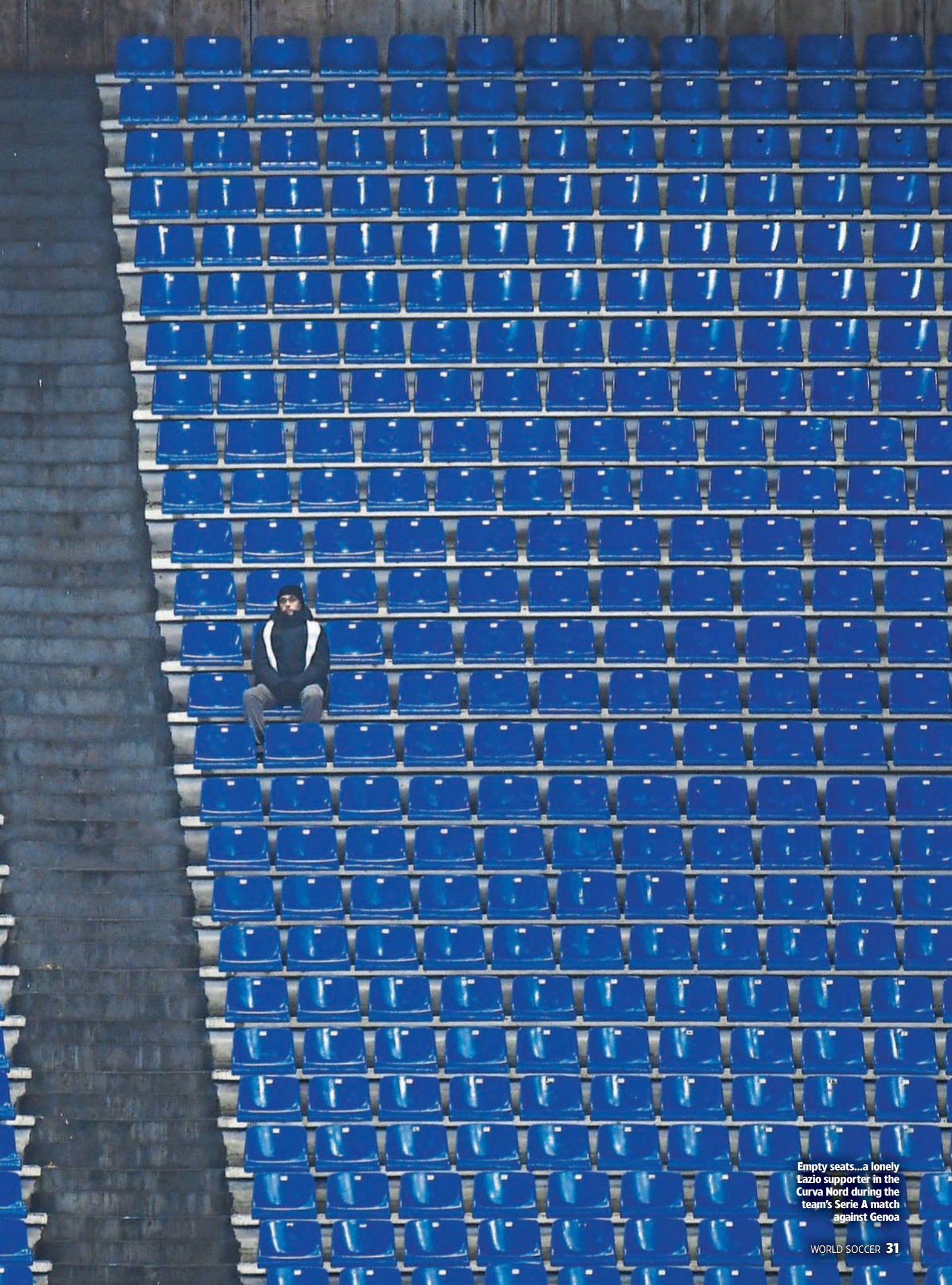
Last summer, a reported 10,000 *Laziali* took to the Via dei Fori Imperiali, the road that carves a direct line through the centre of the Imperial Forums to connect the Colosseum to the Capitoline Hill.

It was a spectacular setting for a swell of flag-waving, flare-yielding supporters bedecked in sky blue to make their latest plea to "*Libera la Lazio*", or free the club, from Lotito, an elected senator since 2022 for the centre-right Forza Italia party.

The spark that had set the tinder alight was Lazio's transfer ban, which came after failing three financial stress tests, a situation that left a squad requiring reinforcements unable to sign any – much to the surprise of returning coach Maurizio Sarri, who had re-joined the club just weeks earlier unaware.

When the 2025-26 season kicked off, disgruntled sections of supporters continued their protests through chants and banners before things escalated again in January.

A criticism that has often been levelled at Lotito has been his reluctance to spend big. According to *Transfermarkt*, he has only spent more than €20 million on three players – one of whom, Mauro Zarate, was signed all the way back in 2009 – and has never come close to matching the club record fee of €56m paid for Argentina ▸



Empty seats...a lonely Lazio supporter in the Curva Nord during the team's Serie A match against Genoa

"I'm here for you, not for him [Lotito]" ...a message to the Lazio players during their clash v Genoa

striker Hernan Crespo back in 2000. Indeed, all seven of the club's most expensive signings of all time – Crespo, Gaizka Mendieta, Juan Sebastian Veron, Christian Vieri, Jaap Stam, Stefano Fiore and Claudio Lopez – belong to a totally different era of Lazio's past.

Nobody expected Lotito to suddenly start splashing the cash, but his decision last season to sell key players like Matteo Guendouzi and Taty Castellanos came as a surprise. Their departures added to existing frustrations such as a perceived lack of investment and ambition, poor communication and sluggish progress with new stadium plans.

At the end of January, supporters announced they would sit out the Serie A fixture against Genoa. As it turned out, they would return only one more time before the season's end.

Lazio's average attendance in recent years has hovered around the 44,000-mark, and last season the supporters set a club record by selling more than 29,000 season tickets – despite the transfer ban.

But when the fans turned, they meant it. Around 3,000 turned up to see Lazio beat Genoa; it was almost like COVID-era football all over again. Thereafter, the striking fans only returned for a win over Milan in March, attending on a strictly one-time-only basis.

"Playing like this becomes depressing and it's not sustainable in the long-term," Sarri said in April. "I don't know who can put things right, but this is a situation that is costing us points."

He wasn't wrong. Lazio dropped ten points in seven boycotted home league games to finish ninth in Serie A, their worst placement in 12 years.

Reports of interested buyers were quashed by the club with a firm statement. The atmosphere was sour, with no European football on the horizon and the relationship between club and fans sinking further every week.

Roman newspaper *Il Tempo* even published a column featuring a mock-up of Lotito as the Emperor Nero, holding a burning torch amid flaming Roman ruins.

"Claudio Lotito finds himself at a crossroads: choosing whether to be Nero, watching everything burn, or Cincinnatus, the Roman dictator who, after saving the city, had the wisdom to return to his fields," it said.

There was more bad news when Lazio were again slapped with more transfer market restrictions, this time forced to have a net-zero market, for failing to meet financial targets.

Sarri left for Atalanta in the summer to be replaced by Gennaro Gattuso, looking to bounce back from his failure to lead Italy back to the World Cup.

Star centre-back Mario Gila (another of Lotito's biggest signings, joining from Real Madrid for €21m in 2022) was sold to Milan, goalkeeper Ivan Provedel joined Internazionale, and Alessio

Rome derby... the Lazio end was almost completely empty for May's clash with Roma

Overgrown... Stadio Flaminio, Lazio's proposed new home

Romagnoli also looks set to leave having already said goodbye to the fans publicly – though a recent move to Qatari outfit Al Sadd fell through, leaving his future in the balance.

It was amid this backdrop that tens of thousands of *Laziali* congregated in blistering Roman summer heat for a protest symbolically outside the Stadio Flaminio – the abandoned former rugby stadium that Lotito has plans to renovate as Lazio's new stadium – at the start of July.

"Never in 126 years have we had a situation this catastrophic, especially from the perspective of respect towards the *Biancoceleste* fans," read a fan statement.

They described the boycott as "the greatest act of love a fan can do" and announced their intention for it to continue this season, as well as refusing to renew season tickets or buy official merchandise.

> "We are fed up with the owner, he doesn't care"
>
> **Lazio supporter Vittorio**

Former club legends Alessandro Nesta, Giuseppe Signori and Luis Alberto were among those to send in recorded messages for the event applauding fans.

Lotito's response to the opposition has thus far not helped matters. An open letter published in Roman newspaper *Il Messaggero* in June said: "The moment has arrived to open a new phase; more dialogue, more listening, more mutual responsibility. I also want a team capable of winning." To many, it was too little, too late.

One thing is clear: with another season overshadowed by off-field matters on the horizon, optimism is in short supply on the sky blue side of Rome.

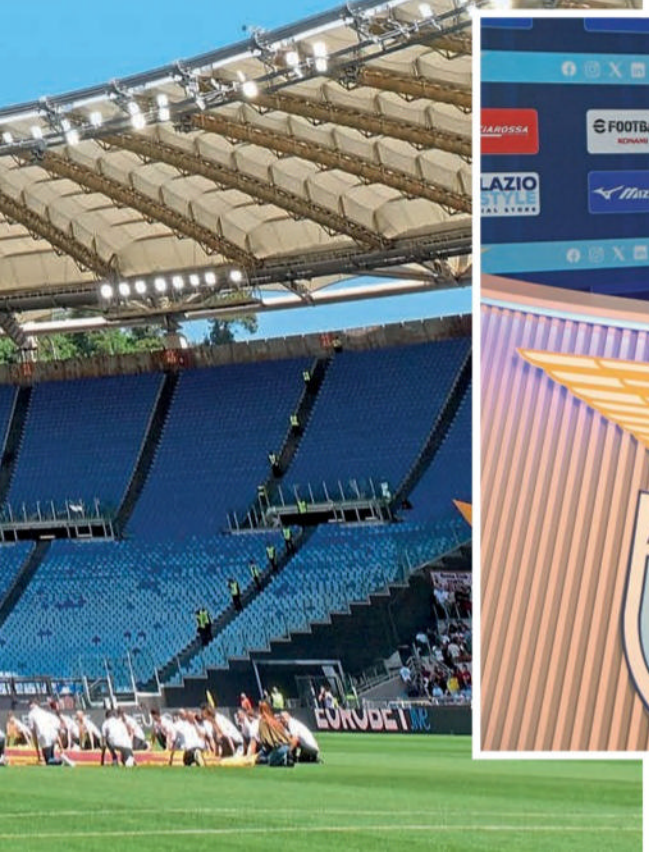
"I'm really scared," admits Vittorio. "We could be fighting for relegation, to be honest with you.

"I think the protests will continue. It could get even worse as poor performances from Lazio will continue. Let's hope someone makes an offer or maybe Forza Italia pushes to sell the club. I don't see any other way out of this."

Alessandro, however, is convinced that the team's performance will ultimately do the talking – and that fans will prove themselves to be as fickle as anywhere else in the world.

"This season will depend solely on the results," he says. "The absence of fans could be an even greater motivation than their presence, so I don't think it will affect the results.

"If the results are poor, the stadium will remain empty; if, on the other hand, a surprisingly good season were to emerge, the stadium will suddenly fill up again."



ABOVE: "Lotito Free Lazio"...protesters during the only match Lazio supporters attended in the second half of last season

LEFT: Under fire...Lazio president Claudio Lotito

COMING SOON

For more reaction to the 2026 World Cup and lots of other exciting content, don't miss these annuals on sale later this year...

World Soccer Annual 2027

The World Soccer Annual 2027 looks back over an extraordinary year of football from across the globe, featuring the standout teams, players and matches from both the international and club game – including the 2026 World Cup, the UEFA Champions League and domestic champions from all the biggest leagues on the planet. Plus, we reveal our pics of the year, goals we'd like to see again, and list the final league tables.

Pre-order: shop.kelsey.co.uk/product/the-official-world-soccer-annual-2027

MATCH Annual 2027

The MATCH Annual 2027 is packed with fun, quizzes and pics, counts down the top 30 strikers in the world and reminisces about the most iconic kits in Premier League history. Plus, look ahead to the 2027 Women's World Cup, discover the most exciting wonderkids in world football and revisit the best moments from the 2026 World Cup all over again.

Pre-order: www.panmacmillan.com/authors/match/match-annual-2027/9781035041121

On sale this autumn

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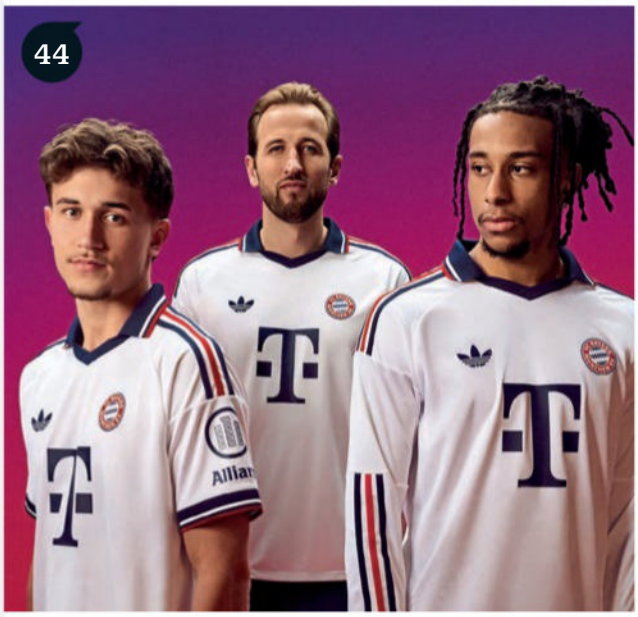
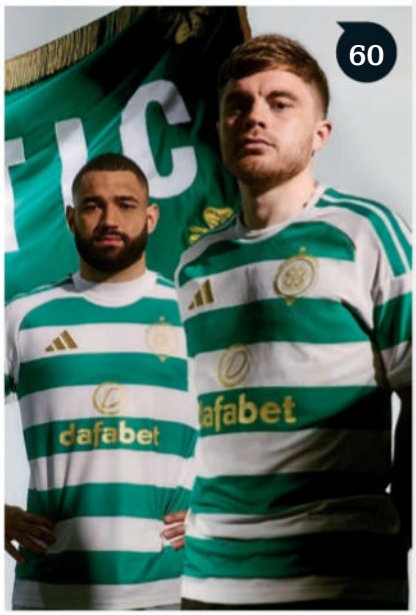
SEASON PREVIEW

2026-27





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Gunners eyeing back-to-back titles

Arsenal are the standout candidates for the Premier League crown

Arsenal manager...can Mikel Arteta's Gunners side defend their league title?

Arsenal now have the muscle memory, the winning mindset and a strengthened squad to retain their Premier League crown, which would be their 15th title in a century of English top-flight campaigns. They have not done back-to-back titles since the mid-1930s, a reminder of the difficulties and particularly the level of competition.

But there is a window of opportunity now. Manchester City have the players but are in the post-Pep Guardiola era. Liverpool have defensive issues. Manchester United still need strengthening. Chelsea could be a threat. Ditto Spurs. All of these challengers to Arsenal's title start the season under different managers to even the start of this year. Arsenal have stability, continuity and still the hunger. New arrivals add to that. Talent flows from the Hale End academy, the elegant dribbler Max Dowman the latest.

The nerves that characterised some of their games last season have been banished. The snarky comments about lacking "bottle" have been thrown back at the sceptics. Belief has taken up residency at the Emirates. Talk of a "dynasty" is ambitious and distracting. The long-term development can continue apace, including the supply-line from Hale End and scouting of future targets across the globe, but the focus has to be game by game, every second counts, every first touch counts. Declan Rice and Gabriel will set the tone, demanding high standards. Bukayo Saka delivers quietly. Martin Odegaard showed what a leader he can be with Norway at the World Cup, even if Rice looks a more warrior-type that fans love.

Is there anything missing? Perhaps a genuine show-stopper in attack, hence the interest in Vinicius Junior – although there was always a suspicion that the Gunners were being used to help lever a better contract at the Bernabeu for the Brazilian.

Christos Tzolis, a 24-year-old Greek winger, has arrived from Club Brugge for £34m as a replacement for Besiktas-bound Leandro Trossard. The Belgian was a highly useful squad member last season, with six goals and six assists in the league, and replacing that output will be a good enough return for Tzolis's first season.

> All the challengers start the season under different managers. Arsenal have stability, continuity and still the hunger

Meanwhile the £75m capture of Bruno Guimaraes from Newcastle United boosts the midfield and could help unlock more attacking creativity.

Arsenal may also have to replace another source of goals; if referees clamp down on blocking at corners,

the Gunners will lose some of their feared set-piece threat. Which prompts the question: will Arteta allow his players to be more expressive this season? It's a balance. Arsenal have the creative players to dominate opponents. Will we see more of Eberechi Eze? Will Dowman get more run-outs? Arteta needs to loosen the leash.

Henry Winter

Team to beat ...Arsenal

New signing... Bruno Guimaraes

WHO'S WHO?

ARSENAL
Manager: Mikel Arteta

ASTON VILLA
Manager: Unai Emery

BOURNEMOUTH
Manager: Marco Rose

BRENTFORD
Manager: Keith Andrews

BRIGHTON & HOVE ALBION
Manager: Fabian Hurzeler

CHELSEA
Manager: Xabi Alonso

COVENTRY CITY
Manager: Frank Lampard

CRYSTAL PALACE
Manager: Pierre Sage

EVERTON
Manager: David Moyes

FULHAM
Manager: Alvaro Arbeloa

HULL CITY
Manager: Sergej Jakirovic

IPSWICH TOWN
Manager: Gary O'Neil

LEEDS UNITED
Manager: Daniel Farke

LIVERPOOL
Manager: Andoni Iraola

MANCHESTER CITY
Manager: Enzo Maresca

MANCHESTER UNITED
Manager: Michael Carrick

NEWCASTLE UNITED
Manager: Matthias Jaissle

NOTTINGHAM FOREST
Manager: Oliver Glasner

SUNDERLAND
Manager: Regis Le Bris

TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR
Manager: Roberto De Zerbi

Marching on...Leeds in pre-season action

LEEDS READY TO MARCH ON

In the end, Leeds United's ambition of surviving in last season's Premier League was achieved with some comfort. This time, they may be aiming a little higher after an intriguing summer of business.

First Harry Wilson, a free transfer from Fulham. Elland Road is going to love the Welsh wizard; quick, deadly and capable of wonder goals. Nothing's ever free, of course – wages and signing-on fee will be substantial – but Wilson is worth it. Just get the ball to him and he'll make something happen for himself or last season's top goalscorer Dominic Calvert-Lewin.

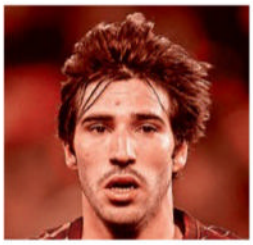
Strengthening at the back was also a top priority for the fifth-leakiest defence in last season's top flight. Tarik Muharemovic – the infamous recipient of Folarin Balogun's stray studs at the World Cup – has arrived from Sassuolo for £34.1m, with James Trafford joining from Manchester City for £45m. The England international goalkeeper, who should be Jordan Pickford's long-term successor, is good with his feet and has strong reflexes. He can improve, but at 23 has plenty of time to develop.

ENGLAND'S MEGA-MONEY MIDFIELDERS

Elliot Anderson was the most expensive English player for scarcely three weeks before Morgan Rogers eclipsed his £116m landmark. Anderson is only 23, still developing the range of his game (adding more of a cutting edge with his final ball and finishing), but his career shows he rises to every challenge.

Manchester City knew they would need a successor to Rodri at some point. Anderson is a different player, more a No.8 than a controlling No.6, but anyone who has met this tough

PLAYERS TO WATCH



SANDRO TONALI
(Tottenham Hotspur)
The midfielder that most teams wanted. Creative, experienced, destructive, ferocious work ethic. Big loss to Newcastle United, albeit huge fee (£92.5m), massive credibility boost to Spurs. After a summer off, the Italian will be hungry.

JORDAN HENDERSON
(Chelsea)
Blues boss Xabi Alonso had identified experience as a commodity that his side clearly lacked, hence the signing of Henderson – after first-choice target Granit Xhaka proved unattainable – and Danny Welbeck from Brighton.

HAYDEN HACKNEY
(Everton)
From Tim Cahill to Jarrod Bowen, recruiting from the EFL has been a speciality of David Moyes' throughout his career. In Hackney, he has signed an England U21 international who was the Championship's Player of the Season in 2025-26.

DAIZEN MAEDA
(Ipswich Town)
Costing £8m from Celtic, the Japan forward offers pace, creativity, goals and relentless pressing. His signing, along with that of Sasa Lukic, Emersonn, Issa Diop, Abdul Fatawu, Kjell Scherpen and Florentino, shows Ipswich's ambition.

LUCAS HERRINGTON
(Hull City)
Tall Australia centre-back who could prove an inspired £17m signing for Hull from Colorado Rapids. Inevitably still a work in progress, the 18-year-old enjoyed some promising moments at the World Cup despite a penalty miss in the shootout v Egypt.

Geordie knows that he will flourish in City's midfield this season.

EYES ON LAMPARD AND CARRICK

The English public has an enduring fascination with the Golden Generation of England players who dominated headlines after the Millennium but never dominated tournaments. Punditry has claimed Gary Neville, Paul Scholes, Wayne Rooney, Jamie Carragher, Rio Ferdinand, Michael Owen, John Terry and, currently, Steven Gerrard. Ashley Cole is in coaching. David Beckham is a billionaire club owner and commercial powerhouse. Only Frank Lampard and Michael Carrick are in the dugouts.

They will be under particular scrutiny, not least from other members of the Golden Generation assessing their old team-mates from the safety of the studio. It's a tense dynamic.

How good is Lampard? He's already overseen more than 275 games, got Derby County into the Championship play-off final, got Chelsea into the top four, kept Everton up and got Coventry City promoted. But many observers remain to be convinced. That's harsh. He's incredibly dedicated, thoughtful and wanting to deliver for Coventry.

How good is Carrick? He's similarly devoted to management, has done well in two spells at Manchester United (14 wins in 20) and, in between, learning plenty in 136 games at Middlesbrough. Carrick's now starting a season at the Theatre of Dreams, audition over, curtain up, pressure on. Good luck to the pair of them. England need home-grown coaches doing well in the Premier League, giving hope to others.

TIME UP FOR TIME-WASTERS?

The World Cup, certainly in the group stage, saw a welcome commitment by officials to let games flow (apart from the wretched hydration breaks). VAR was of the original "clear and obvious" variety, the game breathed, and fans breathed a sigh of relief. Let's hope that attitude permeates the Premier League.

In a welcome development, Pro Ref (the rebranded PGMO) will trial a new rule "designed to address occasions where goalkeeper injuries have been used to disrupt momentum, slow the game down or create opportunities for tactical instruction". So if the game is halted by a goalkeeper going down injured, one of his team-mates has to go off for a minute. About time.

Henry Winter

Golden Generation ...Frank Lampard and Michael Carrick

12 SUMMER SIGNINGS

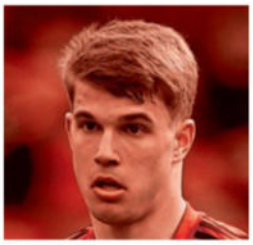
Record-breaking deal...Morgan Rogers

1. **MORGAN ROGERS** *(Aston Villa to Chelsea)*
2. **ELLIOT ANDERSON** *(Nottingham Forest to Manchester City)*
3. **MATEUS FERNANDES** *(West Ham United to Tottenham Hotspur)*
4. **MAXENCE LACROIX** *(Crystal Palace to Chelsea)*
5. **JOHAN MANZAMBI** *(Freiburg to Aston Villa)*
6. **ANDREY SANTOS** *(Chelsea to Manchester United)*
7. **BAZOUMANA TOURE** *(Hoffenheim to Newcastle United)*
8. **MAMADOU SANGARE** *(Lens to Brentford)*
9. **YOURI TIELEMANS** *(Aston Villa to Manchester United)*
10. **GONZALO GARCIA** *(Real Madrid to Fulham)*
11. **RONALD ARAUJO** *(Barcelona to Liverpool)*
12. **ALEJANDRO GARNACHO** *(Chelsea to Aston Villa)*

JJ GABRIEL
(Manchester United)
The forward doesn't turn 16 until October and still has GCSEs to get through, let alone his Premier League debut. He's young and raw, and United have attacking options, but occasional glimpses of an undoubted talent will be exciting.

RIO NGUMOHA
(Liverpool)
Caught the eye so much in the acclimatisation training camp ahead of the World Cup that Thomas Tuchel handed the 17-year-old winger a senior England cap in the friendly v New Zealand. Now ready for a major season at his club.

JOHAN MANZAMBI
(Aston Villa)
Three goals and two assists at the World Cup highlighted the Switzerland midfielder's talent at only 20. The £51m fee could end up proving smart business by Villa, especially as Unai Emery's coaching and guidance are likely to improve him further.



LUKA VUSKOVIC
(Brighton)
Spending £46m on an untested teenage centre-back is a significant outlay for Brighton. But they will have done their data work, and may well get the better of a deal that saw Jan Paul van Hecke go the opposite way to Spurs.

CARL RUSHWORTH
(Coventry City)
Coventry's Player of the Year while on loan from Brighton. The GK's £22m signing saw the Sky Blues break their transfer record four times over the summer – on Aurele Amenda, Loum Tchaouna, Rushworth and Ghana's Caleb Yirenkyi.

Barca and Real turn back the clocks

The arch-rivals and Spain's two biggest clubs are feeling nostalgic for 2010

New recruit...speedy winger Karim Adeyemi has joined Barcelona from Borussia Dortmund

In the summer of 2010, the eyes of the footballing world were on Spain. The national team had just won the World Cup thanks to a goal from a Barcelona player in the final, and *Los Cules* were embarking on a new campaign aiming to win La Liga for the third year in a row. In an attempt to stop them, Real Madrid hired Jose Mourinho.

Sixteen years later, here we are again. True, that Barcelona side had also won a Champions League title just a year earlier, and few would favourably compare Hansi Flick's current side with the one built by Pep Guardiola. Equally, Mourinho's stock is not what it was in 2010; back then he arrived fresh from a treble-winning season with Internazionale, now he returns off the back of trophyless spells at Fenerbahce and Benfica.

This renewal of Mourinho v Barcelona, then, is unlikely to hit quite the same heights as last time. But there is plenty of intrigue nevertheless.

For Real Madrid, this is their third successive season with a different manager at the helm. Unlike last summer, when Xabi Alonso arrived with a mandate to reshape the club's on-pitch identity, Mourinho's return has a simpler objective: unite the fanbase and restore a winning culture.

Setting aside the 2024 UEFA Super Cup and FIFA Intercontinental Cup – honours not even Real Madrid fans choose to brag about – they've not lifted a major trophy since the 2024 Champions League final. For any other club, calling that a drought would seem absurd, but for Real Madrid it's grounds for sweeping change. Alonso left, Alvaro Arbeloa failed his probation period, and club president Florentino Perez was enticed by nostalgia.

For all his doubters, Mourinho returns as one of football's most decorated head coaches and someone who understands the pressures of the Bernabeu. His first spell between 2010 and 2013 only yielded one La Liga title and one Copa del Rey, but he built a side that was capable of challenging Guardiola's Barcelona and reignited belief among the fanbase. That's precisely what the club needs once more.

Ironically, Mourinho's return could also prove a psychological boost for Barca. Few figures inspire such fierce rivalry in Catalonia, and if anything can ensure that there is no loss of hunger for more silverware at Camp Nou it's Mourinho's return to the capital.

> This renewal of Mourinho v Barcelona is unlikely to hit quite the same heights as last time. But there is plenty of intrigue nevertheless

Real Madrid have not only opted for experience in the dugout but also on the pitch, signing players with Champions League pedigree in the form of Marc Cucurella (Chelsea), Denzel Dumfries (Inter), Ibrahima Konate (Liverpool) and Bernardo Silva (Manchester City). The exceptions are 19-year-old winger Yan Diomande from RB Leipzig and 21-year-old Levante striker Carlos Espi.

Meanwhile, Barcelona have brought in Anthony Gordon from Newcastle United and Karim Adeyemi from

Back at the Bernabeu... Jose Mourinho

Borussia Dortmund and said goodbye to veteran striker Robert Lewandowski, meaning they now boast an attacking roster of pure pace. A replacement for the Poland centre-forward is still being pursued – although 18-year-old Egypt striker Hamza Abdelkarim made a strong claim for the role in pre-season – but any other fresh attacking impetus is expected to come from the academy.

Midfielder Marc Bernal missed almost the entirety of the 2024-25 campaign through injury, but enjoyed an impressive comeback last season. With Netherlands ace Frenkie de Jong expected to miss the opening weeks of the season due to a knee ligament injury, there is an opportunity for the 19-year-old *La Masia* graduate to cement his place in midfield alongside Pedri and Dani Olmo – especially if negotiations for Spain's World Cup-winning captain Rodri, who Real Madrid were also heavily linked with earlier in the summer, drag on into the new campaign. Talks with Manchester City were reportedly ongoing at the time of writing.

With two league titles in two seasons, Flick has given Barcelona supporters little reason to doubt him. Mourinho's arrival is Madrid's attempt to disrupt the serenity that has existed at Camp Nou. Will it work, or will it backfire?

Jared Tinslay

WHO'S WHO?

ALAVES
Manager: Quique Sanchez Flores

ATHLETIC CLUB
Manager: Edin Terzic

ATLETICO MADRID
Manager: Diego Simeone

BARCELONA
Manager: Hansi Flick

CELTA VIGO
Manager: Claudio Giraldez

DEPORTIVO LA CORUNA
Manager: Antonio Hidalgo

ELCHE
Manager: Martin Anselmi

ESPANYOL
Manager: Manolo Gonzalez

GETAFE
Manager: Jose Bordalas

LEVANTE
Manager: Luis Castro

MALAGA
Manager: Juan Francisco Funes

OSASUNA
Manager: Luis Miguel Ramis

RACING SANTANDER
Manager: Jose Alberto Lopez

RAYO VALLECANO
Manager: Benat San Jose

REAL BETIS
Manager: Manuel Pellegrini

REAL MADRID
Manager: Jose Mourinho

REAL SOCIEDAD
Manager: Pellegrino Matarazzo

SEVILLA
Manager: Luis Garcia

VALENCIA
Manager: Carlos Corberan

VILLARREAL
Manager: Inigo Perez

SIMEONE TO SAY *ADIOS*?

The Argentine head coach remains under contract at Atletico Madrid until 2027, with the option of extending his contract for a further year, but there's a growing sense in the Spanish capital that his spell at the Metropolitano is coming to a close.

Speculation around his future intensified in March when Atletico's new majority owners Apollo Sports Capital took control of the club. Simeone, currently La Liga's longest-serving head coach, has previously admitted that he would one day like to manage his former side Internazionale, although Cristian Chivu's outstanding debut season means that vacancy is unlikely to arise imminently.

A more realistic opportunity could come with Argentina, where head coach Lionel Scaloni is expected to step down when his contract expires in December. Whether this proves to be Simeone's final campaign at Atletico or not, the end of his record-breaking reign feels closer than ever.

***Adios?*...could this be Diego Simeone's final season in La Liga?**

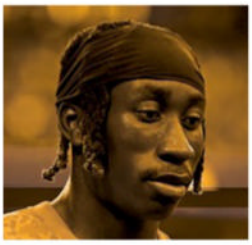
LA LIGA NEW BOYS

Racing Santander ended a 14-year absence from La Liga after winning the Segunda Division last season. Consecutive relegations in 2012 and 2013 sent them into the third tier, where they spent seven seasons overall, before Jose Alberto Lopez took charge in 2022. Under the 44-year-old, they've been on an upward trajectory, playing an attractive style of football that finally earned them promotion.

They're joined by Deportivo La Coruna, Spanish champions back

PLAYERS TO WATCH

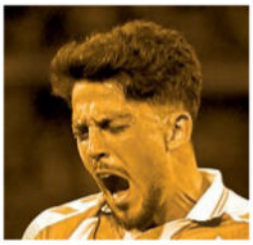
▲ ANTHONY GORDON
(Barcelona)
The England winger said all the right things during his Barcelona unveiling – and even in Spanish – but at Camp Nou the former Newcastle United man is about to experience a level of scrutiny unlike anything he's witnessed before.



▲ YAN DIOMANDE
(Real Madrid)
The Ivory Coast winger was expected to join PSG before Real Madrid swooped in to land him for a fee that could rise to €140m. Only Lamine Yamal completed more successful dribbles across Europe's top five leagues in 2025-26.

▲ MORTEN HJULMAND
(Atletico Madrid)
The 27-year-old Denmark international adds steel and leadership to Atleti's midfield, having captained his former sides Sporting and Lecce. He's built his reputation on elite ball-winning and an intelligent reading of the game.

▲ PIERRE-EMERICK AUBAMEYANG
(Deportivo La Coruna)
The well-travelled striker returns to La Liga, having spent a brief but memorable spell at Barcelona in 2022. The Gabon star arrives after scoring ten goals in 30 Ligue 1 appearances for Marseille last season.



▲ PABLO FORNALS
(Real Betis)
No player created more chances in La Liga last campaign than Fornals. The arrival of defensive midfielder Facundo Bernal from Fluminense could hand the ex-West Ham United playmaker even greater creative freedom.

in 2000, whose return ends an eight-year exile from the top flight and revives the Galician derby with Celta Vigo.

Completing the trio are Malaga. Regulars in La Liga between 2009 and 2018, the Andalusian club also endured the pain of dropping into the third tier in 2023-24, before completing an impressive climb back to the top.

ANOTHER EPIC BATTLE AT THE BOTTOM

Last season's survival fight was one of Europe's most compelling, with just two points separating 19th-placed Girona from 13th-placed Sevilla in the final standings – and another tightly contested battle looks likely.

A cluster of teams – including Osasuna, Levante, Elche and Alaves – are likely to be scrapping to survive relegation once again. Osasuna and Elche both begin new eras under first-time La Liga coaches, Luis Miguel Ramis and Martin Anselmi respectively, while Sevilla continue to battle serious financial uncertainty after a Sergio Ramos-led consortium failed in its attempt to buy the club.

Of the three promoted teams, Deportivo appear to have had the strongest summer and could be best positioned to beat the drop.

HOW HIGH CAN VILLARREAL FLY?

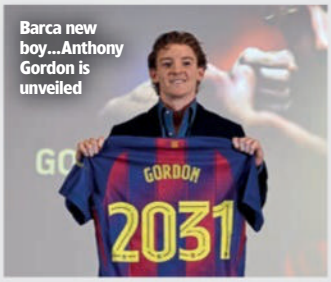
Villarreal finished third in La Liga last season, but still ended the campaign 14 points behind Real Madrid and 22 adrift of champions Barcelona. Even so, there was a brief spell in December when genuine title ambitions didn't seem entirely fanciful. Victory over Barcelona in December would've moved the Yellow Submarine to within five points of top spot. Instead, a 2-0 defeat effectively ended those conversations, but the fact they existed at all was testament to the club's progress.

They've since made one of the most intriguing appointments of the summer by hiring Inigo Perez from Rayo Vallecano. A former assistant to Andoni Iraola, Perez guided Rayo to successive eighth-place finishes and the Conference League final, and is an extremely promising young coach.

Jared Tinslay

Exciting appointment... Villarreal's new boss Inigo Perez

12 SUMMER SIGNINGS



Barca new boy...Anthony Gordon is unveiled

1. **ANTHONY GORDON** *(Newcastle United to Barcelona)*
2. **MARC CUCURELLA** *(Chelsea to Real Madrid)*
3. **IBRAHIMA KONATE** *(Liverpool to Real Madrid)*
4. **MORTEN HJULMAND** *(Sporting to Atletico Madrid)*
5. **LEE KANG-IN** *(PSG to Atletico Madrid)*
6. **KARIM ADEYEMI** *(B. Dortmund to Barcelona)*
7. **DENZEL DUMFRIES** *(Internazionale to Real Madrid)*
8. **ALEX GRIMALDO** *(Bayer Leverkusen to Atletico Madrid)*
9. **BERNARDO SILVA** *(Manchester City to Real Madrid)*
10. **FACUNDO BERNAL** *(Fluminense to Real Betis)*
11. **MARTIN SATRIANO** *(Lyon to Getafe)*
12. **FACUNDO BUONANOTTE** *(Brighton to Elche)*

CARLOS ESPI
(Real Madrid)
The Levante academy graduate emerged as one of La Liga's breakthrough stars last season, scoring ten goals in the final 14 matches to secure his club's survival. His €25m move to Real makes him Levante's record sale.

AROUNA SANGANTE
(Sevilla)
A shrewd free signing for Sevilla, landing the former Le Havre captain after his contract expired. Still only 24, the Senegalese centre-back is yet to make his senior international debut but possesses considerable potential.

FLORIAN LEJEUNE
(Rayo Vallecano)
The veteran French defender earned a contract extension after another outstanding campaign, keeping him at Rayo until 2028. Aged 35, the ex-Alaves, Girona, Eibar, Villarreal and Newcastle United centre-back is the defensive leader for his side.

ALBERTO MOLEIRO
(Villarreal)
The exciting winger or attacking midfielder enjoyed an excellent first season with the Yellow Submarine following his move from Las Palmas, contributing ten goals and five assists in 37 league appearances.

RYUNOSUKE SATO
(Valencia)
Known as "Ryu", the 19-year-old attacking midfielder arrives after being named the J.League's Young Player of the Year in 2025. Already a five-cap international, he was unfortunate to miss out on Japan's World Cup squad.

Can Bayern be beaten?

A familiar question faces the German top flight as another league season begins

Likeliest challengers...if Bayern Munich trip up, Borussia Dortmund look best placed to catch them

As Bayern Munich, Bundesliga champions in 13 of the last 14 years, look to extend that sequence of supremacy, the best of the rest can only pray that the Bavarians suffer a World Cup hangover.

With 17 members of the current Bayern squad involved in this summer's main event, they are more exposed than any other club to the potential fall-out: player fatigue, mental exhaustion, post-tournament blues of varying kinds and truncated pre-season preparation. Bayern coach Vincent Kompany will need to box clever to cope, though he does have the advantage of a huge squad, recently reinforced by the arrivals of *Nationalmannschaft* left-back Nathaniel Brown (Eintracht Frankfurt) and Morocco forward Ismael Saibari, acquired from PSV.

They join a playing staff that is already far stronger than the would-be challengers, Borussia Dortmund, RB Leipzig and Bayer Leverkusen. Bayern boast world-class performers all over the pitch plus an enviable roster of back-ups.

Just as importantly, that trio of supposed title challengers all find themselves in the middle of transitional periods at the moment.

Dortmund are bedding in a new management power structure, with Carsten Cramer still finding his feet after taking over from battle-hardened CEO Hans-Joachim Watzke late last year and Ole Book, a key figure in Elversberg's fairy-tale ascent to the Bundesliga, arriving last spring as director of sport.

At Leipzig and Leverkusen, both are in the midst of a coaching reboot. The Red Bull side somewhat surprisingly sacked Ole Werner and replaced him with former Argentina and Bayern central defender Martin Demichelis, while BayArena bosses went headhunting in Toulouse after dispensing with the services of Kasper Hjulmand, bringing in the highly-rated Spaniard Carles Martinez Novell. RB inevitably will miss brilliant young Ivorian winger Yan Diomande, who was snapped up by Real Madrid.

> **Bayern Munich boast world-class performers all over the pitch plus an enviable roster of back-ups**

If Bayern should slip up in the months ahead, Dortmund appear the best-equipped to profit. No matter that the *Schwarz-Gelben* squad latterly has lost a certain amount of market value. Under Nico Kovac, who took over at the Ruhr giants early in 2025, BVB have improved immeasurably, better organised, harder to beat and infinitely more intense and

spirited. Ruthless pruning has been the order of the day of late, symbolised by the decision to grant long-serving attacking midfielder Julian Brandt a free transfer to Ajax and to allow talented winger Karim Adeyemi to join Barcelona. Coming in is the teenage Greece wide-man Konstantinos Karetsas, bought from Belgian side Genk for €30m.

Nick Bidwell

Bayern Munich goal machine...Harry Kane

Bayern new boy... Nathaniel Brown

WHO'S WHO?

AUGSBURG
Manager: Manuel Baum

BAYER LEVERKUSEN
Manager: Carles Martinez Novell

BAYERN MUNICH
Manager: Vincent Kompany

BORUSSIA DORTMUND
Manager: Niko Kovac

BORUSSIA MONCHENGLADBACH
Manager: Eugen Polanski

COLOGNE
Manager: Rene Wagner

EINTRACHT FRANKFURT
Manager: Adi Hutter

ELVERSBERG
Manager: Vincent Wagner

FREIBURG
Manager: Julian Schuster

HAMBURG
Manager: Merlin Polzin

HOFFENHEIM
Manager: Christian Ilzer

MAINZ
Manager: Urs Fischer

PADERBORN
Manager: Ralf Kettemann

RB LEIPZIG
Manager: Martin Demichelis

SCHALKE
Manager: Miron Muslic

STUTTGART
Manager: Sebastian Hoeness

UNION BERLIN
Manager: Mauro Lustrinelli

WERDER BREMEN
Manager: Daniel Thioune

Under the spotlight... RB Leipzig's new boss Martin Demichelis

SPOTLIGHT ON DEMICHELIS

Hiring and firing at the drop of a hat, RB Leipzig's top brass do not do compromise and Martin Demichelis, the club's freshly-appointed boss, will be well-aware of the fate that recently befell his predecessor Ole Werner, unceremoniously axed just weeks after steering the *Roten Bullen* to Champions League qualification.

Not only must Demichelis achieve results, he has to do so by making RB more direct, more aggressive and more entertaining. Quite a mission.

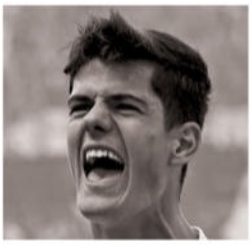
Two areas require the Argentine's immediate attention: the team's poor individual running statistics and powers of recovery, only successfully rescuing points in three games out of 34 last season after falling behind.

LEVERKUSEN HOPING FOR ANOTHER ALONSO

Ignore the fact that Carles Martinez Novell was not the first choice for the BayArena hot seat, only installed when former Bournemouth manager Andoni Iraola opted to join Liverpool instead. As he proved in three highly-successful years with Toulouse in Ligue 1, the 42-year-old, once a youth coach for Espanyol and Barcelona in his native Catalonia, is one of Europe's most promising young head coaches, a man with more than a hint of Pep Guardiola about him.

After a sub-par sixth-place in the Bundesliga last term – thus depriving them of a Champions League ticket – the *Werkself* urgently need a shot in the arm and in Martinez Novell, the second Spanish coach in their history, they hope to have finally found a worthy successor to Xabi Alonso.

PLAYERS TO WATCH



CHEMA ANDRES
(Stuttgart)
Bought for only €3m from Real Madrid a year ago, the Spain Under-21 holding midfielder swiftly became a Bundesliga revelation, ultra-strong in the tackle, immensely intelligent and a key factor in Stuttgart's fourth-place finish.

NATHAN DE CAT
(Hoffenheim)
Hoffenheim, who narrowly missed out on a Champions League spot last campaign, recently paid Anderlecht €20m for this athletic and powerful central midfielder, who exploded onto the Belgian scene in 2025-26. Still just 18.

KENNET EICHHORN
(Bayer Leverkusen)
The *Werkself* pulled off a major coup this summer by beating the likes of Bayern, Dortmund, Manchester City and Liverpool to the signature of this gifted 17-year-old, a controlling midfielder often likened to Germany icon Toni Kroos.

MAXIME ESTEVE
(RB Leipzig)
RB are banking on the recently-signed French central defender, snapped up from Burnley in a £27.3m deal, to be one of the Saxon side's authority figures. Big, strong, happy playing a high line and a natural organiser.

DANIEL HEUER FERNANDES
(Hamburg)
German-Portuguese GK, who at the age of 33 is in the form of his life at the moment, so impressive last term that many rated him the best custodian in the entire Bundesliga. Now in his eighth season at HSV.

ELVERSBERG'S UNDERDOG STORY CONTINUES

A club that has gone from the fourth tier of the German system to the top flight in just five years should never be written off. Unshakeable self-belief runs through the Elversberg DNA and coach Vincent Wagner has pieced together an outstanding collective, one of resilience and solid tactical awareness.

In addition to the key figures from last season – Austrian goalkeeper Nicolas Kristof, goalscoring Bulgarian winger Lukas Petkov and French striker David Mokwa – the recruitment this summer has been first-rate, including young United States wide-man Cole Campbell (ex-Dortmund), attacking midfielder Noah Darvich, a former Germany youth team star on a 12-month assignment from Stuttgart, and another loanee in Leverkusen box-to-box operative Francis Onyeka.

THE NEXT MANZAMBI?

Freiburg will undoubtedly miss the versatility, flair and goalscoring prowess of young Switzerland midfielder Johan Manzambi after his £51m move to Aston Villa. But the Black Forest outfit, arguably the best-run medium-sized club in the country, don't seem particularly worried. Similar to overachieving Premier League sides like Brentford, Bournemouth and Brighton, Freiburg have a knack for selling key players for large fees and then finding excellent replacements at a fraction of the cost.

Manzambi's most likely successor is new Japanese signing Rihito Yamamoto, snapped up from Belgian side Sint-Truiden for just €7m, a bargain for an outstanding engine room all-rounder with masses of potential. As impressive creatively as he is hard-working.

Nick Bidwell

Straight to work... Leverkusen's Carles Martinez Novell

12 SUMMER SIGNINGS

New boy... Leverkusen paid €32m for Afonso Moreira

1. **ISMAEL SAIBARI** *(PSV to Bayern Munich)*
2. **NATHANIEL BROWN** *(Eintracht Frankfurt to Bayern Munich)*
3. **MAXIME ESTEVE** *(Burnley to RB Leipzig)*
4. **AFONSO MOREIRA** *(Lyon to Bayer Leverkusen)*
5. **NATHAN DE CAT** *(Anderlecht to Hoffenheim)*
6. **NOEL ASEKO** *(Bayern Munich to Eintracht Frankfurt)*
7. **BARA SAPOKO NDIAYE** *(Gambinos Stars to Bayern Munich)*
8. **JOANE GADOU** *(Red Bull Salzburg to Borussia Dortmund)*
9. **FACUNDO MEDINA** *(Marseille to Bayer Leverkusen)*
10. **ROCCO REITZ** *(Borussia Monchengladbach to RB Leipzig)*
11. **DZENAN PEJCINOVIC** *(Wolfsburg to Stuttgart)*
12. **LEO SAUER** *(Feyenoord to Stuttgart)*

KEISUKE GOTO
(Freiburg)
When announcing the arrival of the towering Japan striker, his new club called him a "daredevil", an apt description of the former Anderlecht man. Full of confidence, vim and sharpness personified in the opposition's box.

OSCAR HOJLUND
(Eintracht Frankfurt)
One of a trio of Danish brothers who play football professionally – along with striker Rasmus (Napoli) and his twin Emil at Schalke – tigerish midfielder Oscar was one of the few bright spots in a mediocre campaign for Eintracht last season.

MAURICE KRATTENMACHER
(Elversberg)
Quick-thinking left-sided attacker, dynamic and a fine dribbler. A graduate of the Bayern youth system, the 20-year-old was beset by hamstring trouble during an off-key loan spell at Hertha Berlin last term.

JULIAN RYERSON
(Borussia Dortmund)
The combative and attack-conscious Norway right-back will be looking to keep up the good work after a superb second half of 2025-26, piling up the assists for Dortmund and playing grittily through injury at the World Cup.

ISMAEL SAIBARI
(Bayern Munich)
Bayern's rotation options just improved exponentially with the €55m arrival of the Morocco stand-out, who meets all the requirements as a playmaker, false nine – where he featured at the World Cup – and in wide positions.

Inter aiming for dominance

Last season's double winners haven't defended a *Scudetto* since 2010, but this could be their year

Title challengers...former Milan and Juventus boss Massimiliano Allegri has taken charge of Napoli

A key question heading into this season has been where the biggest challenge to Internazionale's domestic dominance might come from?

Despite their shock Champions League exit at the hands of Bodo/Glimt, Cristian Chivu's side were rarely troubled domestically last time around as they secured a league and cup double. They begin the upcoming Serie A campaign as favourites to win their first back-to-back league titles since the Jose Mourinho era.

Nicolo Barella, who has won the *Scudetto* and the Coppa Italia three times each in his seven seasons at Inter, insists their appetite for success is as strong as ever.

"To do well we have to win both again and win the Supercoppa, as well as trying to do better in the Champions League," he told *La Gazzetta dello Sport*. "It'll be difficult, you need lots of energy, but those are our targets."

Inter will be without Dutchman Denzel Dumfries, now at Real Madrid, who returned from injury last season to play a crucial role in the club's pursuit of the double. But much is expected of Serbia midfielder Aleksandar Stankovic, for whom Inter have exercised a buy-back clause to re-sign from Belgian champions Club Brugge.

While a title challenge from their traditional rivals Milan and Juventus cannot be discounted, much depends on how both clubs react in the wake of their failure to qualify for this season's Champions League (more on pages 68-69).

Seeking to take advantage will be Massimiliano Allegri's Napoli. Their appointment of the six-time Serie A winning-coach gives him a chance of redemption following his sacking by Milan. For the second time in his career Allegri has taken over from Antonio Conte, whose recent success with Napoli he will be determined to emulate.

"We want to get to March still in the running for all of our targets: the championship, the Champions League and the Coppa Italia," he said.

Allegri has inherited a quality squad which, had it not been for a spate of injuries, would have given Inter much stiffer competition last time around. The permanent signings of Rasmus Hojlund and Alisson Santos this summer have been a statement of intent. Both were instrumental in Napoli finishing as runners-up.

> "To do well we have to win both again and win the Supercoppa, as well as trying to do better in the Champions League"
>
> Inter midfielder Nicolo Barella

Roma, who were third, also have title aspirations. "It would be great to establish ourselves near the top of the table," said their head coach Gian Piero Gasperini ahead of his second season at the capital city club. "And if you manage to stay there, and stay consistent, you have

the chance to aim for the *Scudetto*."

Gasperini hopes his team can pick up where they left off in the spring, when seven wins in their last nine games swept them into the Champions League for the first time in eight years. In Netherlands forward Donyell Malen they boasted the league's most prolific striker in the second half of the season, and he has joined permanently after that successful loan spell.

Greg Whelan

Title defence...Nicolo Barella and Marcus Thuram will be key players for Inter

Outsiders...Roma boss Gian Piero Gasperini

WHO'S WHO?

ATALANTA
Manager: Maurizio Sarri

BOLOGNA
Manager: Domenico Tedesco

CAGLIARI
Manager: Fabio Pisacane

COMO
Manager: Cesc Fabregas

FIORENTINA
Manager: Fabio Grosso

FROSINONE
Manager: Massimiliano Alvini

GENOA
Manager: Daniele De Rossi

INTERNAZIONALE
Manager: Cristian Chivu

JUVENTUS
Manager: Luciano Spalletti

LAZIO
Manager: Gennaro Gattuso

LECCE
Manager: Eusebio Di Francesco

MILAN
Manager: Ruben Amorim

MONZA
Manager: Ivan Juric

NAPOLI
Manager: Massimiliano Allegri

PARMA
Manager: Carlos Cuesta

ROMA
Manager: Gian Piero Gasperini

SASSUOLO
Manager: Alberto Aquilani

TORINO
Manager: Ignazio Abate

UDINESE
Manager: Kosta Runjaic

VENEZIA
Manager: Giovanni Stroppa

Managerial merry-go-round...Maurizio Sarri has left Lazio for Atalanta with Gennaro Gattuso replacing him at the capital club

THE MANAGERIAL MERRY-GO-ROUND SPINS AGAIN

Almost half of the league is kicking off the season with a new head coach at the helm.

Alongside those of Massimiliano Allegri and Ruben Amorim at Napoli and Milan respectively, one of the most intriguing appointments is Gennaro Gattuso's return to a Serie A touchline for the first time in five years. The ex-Italy head coach has taken over at Lazio in place of Maurizio Sarri, who in turn has replaced Raffaele Palladino at Atalanta.

Another ex-national team boss now plying his trade in Serie A is Domenico Tedesco. At Bologna, the former Belgium and Fenerbahce coach has succeeded Vincenzo Italiano, who moved in the opposite direction to lead their Istanbul rivals Besiktas.

Other changes include the recruitment of Alberto Aquilani and Ignazio Abate, two coaches who have impressed in Serie B, by Sassuolo and Torino respectively, while the former Roma, Atalanta and Southampton head coach Ivan Juric is also back in Serie A with newly-promoted Monza.

FIORENTINA BOUNCING BACK

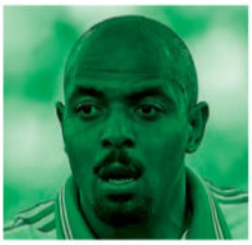
A major overhaul this summer has underscored Fiorentina's ambition to put one of the worst seasons in their recent history behind them. The two-time Conference League finalists only narrowly avoided dropping out of Serie A after failing to win any of their opening 15 games of 2025-26.

In response, head coach Fabio Grosso has been headhunted from Sassuolo, who impressed on their return to Italy's top division last season.

A raft of incoming players includes Ivory Coast midfielder Christ Inao Oulai,

PLAYERS TO WATCH

PIO ESPOSITO
(Internazionale)
Since breaking into Inter's first team last season, the 21-year-old has emerged as one of Italy's most potent attacking talents. The young striker scored ten goals for his club and five more for his country in 2025-26. Hot property.



DONYELL MALEN
(Roma)
The 27-year-old Dutch forward had a remarkable debut season in Serie A in 2025-26, scoring 14 goals in just 18 games following his loan move from Aston Villa in January. The ex-PSV and Dortmund ace has now joined Roma permanently.

ALISSON SANTOS
(Napoli)
Deputising for the injured David Neres, the Brazilian winger impressed during a loan spell from Sporting last campaign. He signed permanently in June after helping Antonio Conte's side qualify for the Champions League.

GONCALO RAMOS
(Milan)
The Portugal international is the man to whom Milan have turned to add much-needed firepower this season. In June, they paid a club record €74m to bring in the 25-year-old striker from European champions Paris Saint-Germain.

LUCA LIPANI
(Sassuolo)
Though still only 21, the midfielder became a first-team regular at Sassuolo last season in his debut Serie A campaign. His reward was a first senior call-up for Italy for the friendlies v Luxembourg and Greece in June.

defenders Viery and Radu Dragusin, wing-back Alex Jimenez, Udinese's much-coveted French midfielder Arthur Atta and, perhaps most intriguingly of all, Argentina attacking midfielder Franco Mastantuono on loan from Real Madrid.

CAN COMO GO AGAIN?

Como are embarking on the biggest season in their history as they prepare to make their Champions League bow. Cesc Fabregas' side are seeking to build on an outstanding Serie A campaign last time around in which they claimed a top-four place ahead of Milan and Juventus, but how they handle the challenge of competing on both the domestic and European fronts remains to be seen.

On and off the pitch, Como have been in a race against time to be ready for the new season. To comply with UEFA regulations, part of the Stadio Giuseppe Sinigaglia has had to be rebuilt.

And needing to field more Italian players in order to meet UEFA's squad requirements, Como's summer signings have included the highly-rated teenager Mattia Liberali, although securing the services again of Argentina playmaker Nico Paz could be their most important piece of transfer business.

VENEZIA DETERMINED TO STAY

Serie A new boys Venezia have invested in the team on an unprecedented scale in an effort to rid themselves of their yo-yo reputation. Their promotion in May under head coach Giovanni Stroppa was their third in the last six seasons, but on both previous occasions they made an immediate return to Serie B.

However, the recruitment of players of the calibre of Armel Bella-Kotchap, Albion Rrahmani and €16m record signing Akor Adams has underlined the club's intention to become a more established top division side.

Venezia, who are co-owned by the Canadian rapper Drake, believe their move to a new stadium will also help. An 18,500-seater venue is under construction and should be ready by next summer.

Greg Whelan

In demand...Como playmaker Nico Paz

12 SUMMER SIGNINGS

Record signing ... Milan unveil Goncalo Ramos

1. **GONCALO RAMOS** *(Paris Saint-Germain to Milan)*
2. **TREVOH CHALOBAH** *(Chelsea to Como)*
3. **MARIO GILA** *(Lazio to Milan)*
4. **CHRIST INAO OULAI** *(Trabzonspor to Fiorentina)*
5. **ROMANO SCHMID** *(Werder Bremen to Frosinone)*
6. **RANDAL KOLO MUANI** *(Paris Saint-Germain to Juventus)*
7. **KERIM ALAJBEGOVIC** *(Bayer Leverkusen to Juventus)*
8. **KONSTANTINOS KOULIERAKIS** *(Wolfsburg to Roma)*
9. **AKOR ADAMS** *(Sevilla to Venezia)*
10. **HAMED TRAORE** *(Marseille to Genoa)*
11. **NICOLO ZANIOLO** *(Galatasaray to Udinese)*
12. **NAHUEL MOLINA** *(Atletico Madrid to Roma)*

JEFF EKHATOR
(Juventus)
A sublime backheel against Napoli was the pick of the teenage forward's four goals last season for his hometown club Genoa. Their academy graduate's huge potential persuaded Juventus to invest over €16m in him this summer.

GIACOMO CALO
(Frosinone)
No other Serie B player came close to creating as many goals last season as the Frosinone playmaker. On top of his 15 assists, the 29-year-old scored ten as his team returned to Serie A. Now aiming to keep them in the top flight.

DAVIDE BARTESAGHI
(Milan)
In his breakout season in Serie A, he was one of the few positives in an otherwise disappointing 2025-26 campaign for Milan. The 20-year-old left-sided defender collected his first senior Italy caps in the summer.

ARTHUR ATTA
(Fiorentina)
The French midfielder is a key figure in the *Viola's* reset following their escape from relegation. In a deal which could rise to a reported €40m, he became their record signing this summer after two very impressive seasons with Udinese.

TASOS DOUVIKAS
(Como)
Little was known of the Greek striker when he joined Como in February 2025, but now Douvikas is one of Serie A's hottest properties. His 14 league goals last season were only bettered by Inter's Lautaro Martinez.

Deja vu all over again

Will it be the same old story in Ligue 1, or can anyone change the script?

Mass exodus...last year's runners-up Lens will have a totally different team for 2026-27

You could be forgiven for having a sense of *deja vu* about the return of Ligue 1, with familiar faces and storylines set to return. It's *re-bonjour* to Will Still, after his ill-fated stint at Southampton, and to Liam Rosenior, whose move across the English Channel to Chelsea was equally unsuccessful and brief. Still, formerly of Lens and Reims, has pitched up at Auxerre, while former Strasbourg boss Rosenior has joined the affluent and exciting project at Paris FC. Both have big points to prove.

Returning too are unfortunate trends now inherent to French football, like the pillaging of talent. Shock success can be a poisoned chalice, as Lens have discovered once again. A second-place finish, Champions League qualification and a maiden Coupe de France triumph have contributed to a mass exodus. Head coach Pierre Sage swiftly exited the scene to join Crystal Palace; club captain and arguably their best but most underrated player, Adrien Thomasson, ran down his contract and joined Rennes; Malang Sarr, their best centre-back, and winger Wesley Said did the same, penning lucrative deals in Saudi Arabia and Qatar respectively; midfielder Mamadou Sangare joined Brentford for a club-record fee; and winger Allan Saint-Maximin has left for MLS. Further exits are expected; taking a title race to the final fortnight of the season again is an uphill task.

And the familiar spectre of financial mismanagement looms large over other prospective challengers and limits their capacity to be just that. Marseille only narrowly avoided exclusion from European competition, Monaco will find it difficult to turn down offers for their most prized assets, Lille, one of the best-run clubs in the league are bargain-hunting once again, as are Lyon, whose well-documented woes are not yet consigned to history.

Does this all sound very similar? It should. Financial crisis and Ligue 1 have gone hand in hand in recent years. There is no light at the end of the tunnel but there is at least reason for intrigue heading into the campaign. There is familiarity – and plenty of it – but there is also novelty.

> There is familiarity – and plenty of it – but there is also novelty

Filipe Luis, heavily coveted thanks to his work at Flamengo, could be a breath of fresh air at Monaco, while former Eintracht Frankfurt manager Dino Toppmoller still falls into the "young and exciting" category and will lead Lens into the Champions League. They are two of an incredible 12 managerial changes in Ligue 1 this summer which, among others, also includes Jens Berthel Askou (Toulouse), Davide Ancelotti (Lille) and Bruno Genesio (Marseille).

It would be remiss not to mention Ligue 1's most famous club, Paris Saint-

Germain. But they exist on another plane, in an entirely different reality to the other 17 clubs. Simultaneously an appendage to the league and its lifeblood, the European champions are destined to once again hold their rivals at arm's length. A sixth consecutive league title looks a foregone conclusion – even before a ball had been kicked.

Luke Entwistle

Monaco's new head coach...ex-Flamengo boss Filipe Luis

The team to beat...PSG

WHO'S WHO?

ANGERS
Manager: Stephane Gilli

AUXERRE
Manager: Will Still

BREST
Manager: Julien Lachuer

LE HAVRE
Manager: Didier Digard

LE MANS
Manager: Patrick Videira

LENS
Manager: Dino Toppmoller

LILLE
Manager: Davide Ancelotti

LORIENT
Manager: Alexandre Dujeux

LYON
Manager: Paulo Fonseca

MARSEILLE
Manager: Bruno Genesio

MONACO
Manager: Filipe Luis

NICE
Manager: Olivier Pantaloni

PARIS FC
Manager: Liam Rosenior

PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN
Manager: Luis Enrique

RENNES
Manager: Franck Haise

STRASBOURG
Manager: Hugo Oliveira

TOULOUSE
Manager: Jens Berthel Askou

TROYES
Manager: Stephane Dumont

***Au revoir*...Paul Pogba was released by Monaco in August**

MONACO GIVE UP ON POGBA

There were always doubts surrounding Paul Pogba's return – and they have been realised. Marseille didn't believe that the 2018 World Cup winner could return to the elite level after an 18-month absence due to a doping ban, leaving Monaco to take the risk instead, signing him to a deal until 2027 last summer.

His return – and first-ever Ligue 1 season – provided great intrigue last summer, yet he only played 115 minutes across six league appearances.

After the latest in a series of injuries, sustained at their training camp in England in August, the trigger was pulled, the contract terminated.

Having already seen Aladji Bamba depart for Newcastle United, Filipe Luis will be eyeing midfield reinforcements before the end of the transfer window closes.

MULTI-CLUB, MAXI-EXPLOITATION

Over half of the clubs competing in Ligue 1 this season are part of a multi-club ownership model. While the likes of PSG, Lens and Monaco sit atop their respective food-chains, many, such as Strasbourg, Troyes and Nice, do not. Owners and consortiums globally are increasingly looking to leach off France's rich talent pool, and the dire financial situation in French football makes clubs easy prey. Ten of the 18 clubs are part of a multi-club model and an 11th, Brest, have publicly stated their receptiveness to becoming part of one.

In the past, French football always felt, well, very French: French owner, French president, French manager,

PLAYERS TO WATCH

▲ PABLO PAGIS
(Paris FC)
It has been a very busy summer for Paris FC, but their marquee signing is Pagis. If the standout star last season for surprise packages Lorient can repeat his numbers, then he could fire his new side into European contention.

▲ MATHYS DETOURBET
(Monaco)
It is usually difficult for a €25m move to go under the radar, but Manchester City's signing of Detourbet from partner club Troyes did just that. A technically gifted playmaker, he will spend the season on loan at Monaco.

▲ LOIS OPENDA
(Lyon)
In his final season at Lens, Openda scored 21 league goals. He carried that form over into his first season at RB Leipzig, but has since failed to hit those heights. After agreeing a loan from Juventus, Lyon hope they've signed the Openda of old.

▲ JULIEN DURANVILLE
(Lyon)
Just as Ansu Fati did at Monaco last season, Duranville moves to Ligue 1 as a former prodigy looking to get his career back on track. At Lyon, he has big boots to fill in replacing Bayer Leverkusen-bound winger Afonso Moreira.

▲ PATRICK ZABI
(Paris FC)
Zabi's displays at Reims saw him dubbed the "New Pogba". An elegant, athletic and technical midfielder, he has taken a significant step by joining Paris FC; if reports are to be believed, he could just as easily have headed to Manchester United.

French playing squad – by and large. Globalisation has changed all of that. Everyone wants their slice of the gateau, and success – as a result – is measured as much by 0s on a deal sheet as points in the table. Ligue 1 is as much a stock exchange as it is a football league. As the start of the season approached, it was less business as usual, and more just business.

MORE MARSEILLE MEDIOCRITY?

Marseille satiated Roberto De Zerbi, investing heavily to deliver him a squad that could push PSG harder for the title. OM rolled the dice, but lost. De Zerbi left midway through last season, replaced by Habib Beye, who finished the campaign, but would not last the summer.

He exited alongside sporting director Medhi Benatia, while club president Pablo Longoria also left. The slate has been wiped clean, but their successors will not be afforded the same luxuries. Sporting director Gregory Lorenzi would have hoped that his move from Brest to OM would see him endowed with more financial flexibility, but the purse-strings have never been tighter at a club that must make considerable savings in order to avoid exclusion from European competitions for the 2027-28 season.

ENCORE!

In the opening years of QSI ownership, PSG were defined by gluttony. But since sealing the Champions League, their Holy Grail, stability has been the order of the day. Their success now makes them the pinnacle for world-class talents like Ousmane Dembele, Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, Vitinha and Joao Neves.

Consequently, recent windows have seen minor adjustments rather than radical change. The tweaks have been minimal this summer too: fringe players Goncalo Ramos and Lee Kang-in have left for large sums, with winger Maghnes Akliouche (Monaco) and Lucas Digne (Aston Villa) the only big incomings thus far, though the club were reportedly in talks to sign Japan goalkeeper Zion Suzuki (Parma) and Spain forward Ferran Torres (Barcelona) at the time of writing. Nonetheless, it will still be a very familiar PSG side that will be looking to make it three-in-a-row in the Champions League this season.

Luke Entwistle

PSG new boy... Maghnes Akliouche in action during the UEFA Super Cup

12 SUMMER SIGNINGS

Lens new boy...Michael Cuisance

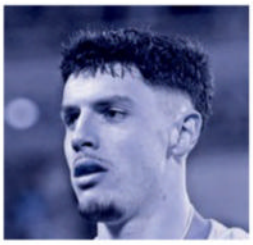
1. **MICHAEL CUISANCE** *(Hertha Berlin to Lens)*
2. **MAGHNES AKLIOUCHE** *(Monaco to Paris Saint-Germain)*
3. **MATTHIS ABLINE** *(Nantes to Monaco)*
4. **PATRICK ZABI** *(Reims to Paris FC)*
5. **CHARLIE CRESSWELL** *(Toulouse to Rennes)*
6. **ELIEZER MAYENDA** *(Sunderland to Rennes)*
7. **FRANJO IVANOVIC** *(Benfica to Lens)*
8. **DIEGO COPPOLA** *(Brighton to Paris FC)*
9. **LUCA KOLEOSHO** *(Burnley to Paris FC)*
10. **MADS BIDSTRUP** *(Red Bull Salzburg to Lyon)*
11. **THORGAN HAZARD** *(Anderlecht to Lens)*
12. **BRANCO VAN DEN BOOMEN** *(Ajax to Angers)*

MAGHNES AKLIOUCHE
(Paris Saint-Germain)
Akliouche's consistency was rewarded with a call-up to the France national team last autumn, a place in the World Cup squad last summer, and now a move to Europe's best side – quite the year for the Monaco academy graduate.

ABDELHAMID AIT-BOUDLAL
(Rennes)
While it was Jeremy Jacquet who got the mega-money move to Liverpool, it could just as easily have been Ait-Boudlal making the jump. The 20-year-old centre-back is already a senior Morocco international.

GESSIME YASSINE
(Strasbourg)
A winger of the viral-compilation mould, the mercurial Yassine will be expected to play a more pivotal role at Strasbourg this campaign having moved midway through last season from Dunkerque. Netted at the World Cup for Morocco.

YACINE TITRAOUI
(Lens)
Amid the exodus at Lens, new blood was needed, and Titraoui could be one of this summer's "sleeper" signings. The 23-year-old midfielder joins from Belgian outfit Charleroi having travelled to the World Cup with Algeria.



MATTHIS ABLINE
(Monaco)
This time last year, Abline had Premier League sides on his trail. Only Nantes' valuation prevented his exit. He has now departed for a club-record fee; his move to Monaco is one of the most expensive in Ligue 1 this summer.

Sporting reset

Portuguese champions in 2024 and 2025, Sporting have rebuilt their squad in the hope of catching last year's winners Porto

When Ruben Amorim left Sporting mid-season in 2024-25, it precipitated an immediate and alarming collapse under his initial replacement, Joao Pereira. One month later and another new manager was in charge, Rui Borges. Plucked from Vitoria Guimaraes, the coach guided the Lions to a stunning league and cup double, ensuring a continuation of unprecedented success in the modern era for the Lisbon club. It was the first time in 70 years Sporting had won back-to-back championships. Borges was given his flowers, but it was Amorim's work that largely accounted for the memorable achievement.

Last season, Borges' first full campaign in charge was a curious affair. On the one hand, Sporting did not win any silverware, failed to beat Benfica, Porto or Braga in seven attempts, and ended it with an embarrassing defeat against second-tier Torreense in the Portuguese Cup final. On the other hand, the Green and Whites played the best football seen in Portugal, had their deepest-ever Champions League run – including victory over two-time European champions Paris Saint-Germain – and were fighting for another league and cup double until the dying embers of the campaign.

In relation to the manager, president Frederico Varandas has evidently put more store in the positives, resisting calls for a change of coach and instead backing Borges to oversee a complete reset at the club.

This summer has seen a definitive break from the Amorim era. Captain Morten Hjulmand, along with Francisco Trincao, Hidemasa Morita, Ousmane Diomande and Geovany Quenda have already left, while Daniel Braganca and Pedro Goncalves have also been linked with exits. Together they represent over 1,000 first-team appearances.

Judging by pre-season, the old guard have been replaced by a high-quality crop of mainly young players, hand-picked to suit Borges' front-foot style. The midfield duo of Issa Doumbia and Sergi Altimira in particular have hit the ground running, while further big-money signings include Rodrigo Zalazar (Braga), Ibrahima Ba (Famalicao) and Australia forward Nestory Irankunda (Watford). In addition, Sporting's famous Alcochete academy continues to supply promising prospects in the shape of Rafael Nel and Flavio Goncalves.

"Trincao and Hjulmand are fantastic players who will go down as greats in the history of Sporting. They arrived, won trophies and had ambition," said Varandas, a perceived dimming of that ambition the main reason behind the overhaul. "They gave their all and we will be eternally grateful to them.

"This transfer market was planned a long time in advance, since the start of last season. We are building a strong squad that we believe will put Sporting in the fight for trophies over the next four years."

After 19 years of a Benfica-Porto duopoly, Sporting's 2020-21 triumph signalled a shift to an unpredictable three-horse race. Defending their crown in 2025 is the only time in the last decade that any of the Big Three have won two leagues in a row, and we can expect a new-look Sporting to be right in the mix again this year.

PLAYERS TO WATCH

DIOGO TRAVASSOS
(Braga)
Never given a chance to fully prove his worth at Sporting, Travassos impressed in loan spells at Estrela da Amadora and Moreirense in several positions on the right flank. After joining Braga, he could make the Lisbon club regret discarding him.

OSKAR PIETUSZEWSKI
(Porto)
The Poland international made several crucial contributions to help Porto clinch the title after signing in January from Jagiellonia Bialystok. An unpredictable and chaotic but utterly fearless winger, the 18-year-old has the talent to become a huge star.

ISSA DOUMBIA
(Sporting)
The Italian was Sporting's main transfer target to replace outgoing captain Morten Hjulmand in central midfield. Early indications suggest they have chosen well. Doumbia matches the all-action style of Hjulmand but with the added bonus of a nose for goal.

New-look squad... Sporting ahead of a pre-season friendly

European ambitions...Braga

FRANCESCO FARIOLI AND SECOND-SEASON SYNDROME

Veni, vidi, vici. Julius Caesar's famous quote perfectly describes the impact of Porto's Italian coach Francesco Farioli on the Primeira Liga last campaign. A barnstorming start in which Porto won 18 of their first 19 Primeira Liga matches was key to last season's title triumph. However, the second half of the campaign was ultimately disappointing in terms of the Dragons' cup and European ambitions. Which version of Farioli's Porto will we see in his second season in Portugal? If the former Ajax and Nice boss can oversee the club's first back-to-back titles since 2013, he will be one of Europe's hottest managerial commodities.

Mr Popular...Francesco Farioli is a big fans' favourite at Porto

> "We are building a strong squad that we believe will put Sporting in the fight for trophies over the next four years"
>
> Sporting president Frederico Varandas

BRAGA TARGET EUROPEAN SILVERWARE

Braga's ascension has been one of the most pleasing alterations to the landscape of Portuguese football over the past 20 years. It has been refreshing to see another club involve themselves into the fight for silverware in what is essentially a three-team league. Braga have also been busy consolidating a fine reputation in Europe. Last season's run to the semi-finals of the Europa League came 15 years after they reached the final of the same competition.

Torreense's shock victory in last season's Portuguese Cup "demoted" Braga to the UEFA Conference League. Rather than welling in disappointment, the club have openly declared that their aim is to win it. Should they do so, it would be another incremental step in the right direction as they continue to chip away at the gap separating them from the Big Three.

THE RESURGENCE OF THE ISLANDERS

Three years ago, Portugal's top flight did not have a single island team in it for the first time in almost half a century. Fast forward to the 2026-27 campaign, and we are back up to three. Maritimo, traditionally the strongest island team, stormed to the Second Division title last year, joining fellow Funchal outfit Nacional and Santa Clara from the Azores, lending the league a unique set of fixtures.

The travel, the unpredictable weather and the raw pitches, especially in the Azores, often pose insurmountable obstacles for the great and the good of the Portuguese game, adding unpredictability to a sometimes dispiritingly predictable league.

Tom Kundert

Wanted: title challengers

Can anyone prevent PSV from cruising to yet another Eredivisie title?

Looking ahead to the new season, it is difficult to see anything other than a fourth consecutive Eredivisie crown for PSV. The Eindhoven club are more stable than their title rivals, stronger in every position except perhaps defence, and led by the impressive Peter Bosz – who turned down the chance to become the next national team head coach.

Their traditional rivals, Feyenoord and Ajax, may find themselves more concerned with battling the likes of AZ, Twente and NEC for the remaining European spots than competing for the title.

With Ajax having undergone a complete metamorphosis (more on that on page 72), last year's runners-up Feyenoord look the likeliest bet to challenge PSV. New general manager Robert Eenhoorn, a former shortstop at the New York Yankees, and new Belgian technical director Devy Rigaux haven't wasted any time, ditching coach Robin van Persie and hiring his former team-mate Giovanni van Bronckhorst. The club hopes to revive the glory days under the 51-year-old, who was Arne Slot's assistant at Liverpool last term. Between 2015 and 2019 the ex-*Oranje* left-back was Feyenoord's most successful coach, winning five trophies in four years, including the league title in 2016-17 and the national cup twice.

However, those hopes depend on who stays in Rotterdam. Eredivisie top goalscorer Ayase Ueda and maverick Algeria winger Anis Hadj Moussa are both wanted by big European clubs, and South Korea midfielder Hwang In-beom has already left for Porto.

Further down the table, it will be interesting to see whether NEC (third last season) and Twente (fourth) can maintain their rise – and both clubs have secured spectacular summer signings. Former Manchester United head coach Erik ten Hag, now Twente's technical director, managed to convince Dutch international Wout Weghorst to join on a free transfer from Ajax. The giant 33-year-old striker grew up in the area and finally gets his chance at his boyhood club. It would come as no surprise if he ends up challenging for this season's Eredivisie Golden Boot.

NEC pulled off an even bigger shock by signing 37-year-old former Serbia playmaker Dusan Tadic – who was without a club following his exit from Emirati outfit Al Wahda – on a two-year contract. It will be his fourth team in the Eredivisie, having previously starred for Groningen, Twente and Ajax. In Amsterdam, he played a pivotal role in helping Ajax reach the semi-finals of the Champions League in 2019. If NEC can keep hold of clever Suriname playmaker Tjaronn Chery and Japan forward Koki Ogawa, who played at the World Cup for Samurai Blue, there is no reason why the Nijmegen club can't go one better than last year, which saw them lose the cup final and narrowly miss out on automatic Champions League qualification.

Or will it be AZ? The Alkmaar club has one of the most talented squads and is often the country's last surviving team in Europe, but also has a habit of being inconsistent. A 4-0 thrashing of an albeit understrength (and ten-man for more than 80 minutes) PSV in the

PLAYERS TO WATCH

MARC-ANDRE TER STEGEN
(Ajax)
The most eye-catching Eredivisie signing of this summer's transfer window. Goalkeeper Ter Stegen lost his place for both Barcelona and Germany due to injury but will be a massive asset – fitness permitting – in Amsterdam. Knows Michel from his loan at Girona.

SHAQUEEL VAN PERSIE
(Feyenoord)
Striker who made his debut under his father Robin and immediately made an impact with some spectacular goals before a severe knee injury ended his season early. Now back to show that RVP was right to give him a chance.

JOEY VEERMAN
(PSV)
Subject of a national debate earlier this summer after being left out of the Netherlands' World Cup squad by Ronald Koeman. The midfielder will be aiming to prove the former national team head coach wrong for overlooking him.

Team to beat...PSV won their third title in a row in 2025-26

High-profile signing...Netherlands striker Wout Weghorst has joined Twente

Dutch Super Cup bodes well.

Despite that defeat, and losing talismanic forward Ismael Saibari to Bayern Munich for £43 million, PSV remain title favourites – especially if they can keep doing what they have done over the past few years – but don't be surprised if there is a shock sprung in this season's Eredivisie.

BEST PRESSERS IN EUROPE

Last season, ADO Den Haag were ranked as the number one team in the world for the heaviest pressure on opponents – according to *CIES Football Observatory* – achieving a maximum score of 100 out of 100 across 883 analysed teams from 56 leagues. An impressive achievement indeed by head coach Robin Peter, especially considering he was hired only a few weeks before the season started yet ended it as second-tier champions.

Whether the 39-year-old German, who started out coaching in the youth teams at RB Leipzig, can repeat this feat at a higher level remains to be seen – especially now that his skipper Jari Vlak, the best player in the Eerste Divisie last season, has moved on to Castellon in Spain. A relegation battle is more likely for the newly-promoted club from The Hague.

> PSV's traditional rivals, Feyenoord and Ajax, may find themselves more concerned with battling for the remaining European spots than competing for the title

CORREIA STEPS UP

Many eyes will also be on Anthony Correia this season. Last year, the 44-year-old performed miracles by keeping Telstar in the Eredivisie with attractive football despite the smallest budget in the league. That success caught the attention of Utrecht, on the hunt for a new head coach after the retirement of Ron Jans.

Utrecht – who narrowly missed out on Conference League football this season after losing to Ajax on penalties in the European play-offs – aren't short of money, but have a tendency of having unrealistic ambitions, making the club a coach's graveyard over the years. How will Correia handle the pressure in only his third year as head coach?

EREDIVISIE DROPS DEEP

Whatever happens domestically, improvement in Europe from Dutch clubs is urgently required. Last season was a disaster, with AZ the only side still active after the winter break. That has cost the Eredivisie its second automatic Champions League ticket and reduced their overall number of European spots from six to five. The Eredivisie is in danger of slipping further down the UEFA rankings; the five-year calculation means that results from the 2021-2022 season, in which Dutch clubs gained many coefficient points, is now out of date. Portugal's Primeira Liga has overtaken it, the Belgian Pro League is snapping at its heels, and another poor showing could open the door to the Greek, Czech, Turkish and Polish leagues as well.

Klaas-Jan Droppert

Normal service set to resume

A repeat of last year's three-horse race looks unlikely after Rangers' raid of Hearts

Eighty-seven minutes into the final-day title decider at Celtic Park, Hearts were closing in on the Premiership title. Lawrence Shankland had put the visitors ahead and despite Arne Engels' leveller, the club top of the table for months looked set to become the first outside the Old Firm to win it since Alex Ferguson's Aberdeen in 1985.

And then Celtic scored twice and the wait goes on.

Within weeks, three of those who had come closest to ending Glasgow's grip on the title had moved to the city. Hearts captain Shankland was first, activating a contract clause to join Rangers, with manager Derek McInnes following and immediately returning to his old club to sign Australia international midfielder Cammy Devlin. At a stroke, they took the parts of Hearts that would hurt them most.

McInnes is Rangers' third managerial appointment in a year, following Danny Rohl's exit for Red Bull Salzburg, and the club hierarchy are clear in their thinking on what's needed now. After a season where they impressed in long spells but crumbled in the final straight, the emphasis is on "leadership, character and mentality". Shankland, immediately named as captain, is the prime example of that approach.

Ivor Pandur (from Hull City), Vanja Dragojevic (Partizan Belgrade), Daisuke Yokota (Hannover) and Ross McCrorie (Bristol City) were also early additions, and the question is whether McInnes can add steeliness and impose himself in a job where capable coaches have struggled. The ex-Ibrox player rejected Rangers' approach in 2017, uncertain about the club's direction; this time the ambition is clear and so is the pressure.

Celtic have won 14 of the last 15 titles but clawed their way to their most recent amid chaos. Brendan Rodgers left early in the campaign, Wilfried Nancy lasted a month, and Martin O'Neill dragged them over the line in a second caretaker spell. The club legend is back on a one-year contract but the fanbase remains irate about senior management, long-term vision and transfer business. Around £17 million has been spent on strikers Camilo Duran from Qarabag and Kasper Hogh (whose Champions League goals for Bodo/Glimt suggest he could be outstanding), but the departure of key players – namely Kasper Schmeichel (retired) and talismanic Japan forward Daizen Maeda (Ipswich Town) – still leaves the impression of a squad that's a work in progress.

Hearts, meanwhile, lost heavily to Sturm Graz and Benfica in Champions League then Europa League qualifying, a stark sign of the task ahead. Belgian boss Wouter Vrancken, identified as McInnes' successor by Tony Bloom's recruitment model that built Union Saint-Gilloise and Brighton, must integrate a raft of signings and adapt to a new environment. Fans have faith in the process but may need patience.

Hearts got closer than anyone in 40 years and their reward was seeing manager and captain reinforce the duopoly they threatened. Another tilt at the title can't be ruled out, but the real question is whether McInnes can topple a Celtic side that should have learned from last year's scare.

In the Ibrox hot seat ...Derek McInnes left Hearts for Rangers

PLAYERS TO WATCH

KASPER HOGH
(Celtic)
Snapped up for a reported £11m club-record fee from Norwegian outfit Bodo/Glimt. Proved his goal threat with strikes against Manchester City, Atletico Madrid and Inter last season. Handed the No.9 jersey at the champions.

LAWRENCE SHANKLAND
(Rangers)
Clinical finisher who was a talismanic figure at Hearts. Started two games for Scotland at the World Cup. Expected to be the focal point of Rangers' attack and address the need for a reliable and consistent goalscorer at Ibrox.

CALVIN MILLER
(Hearts)
Key man for Falkirk in back-to-back promotions from League One to the Premiership and shone as the newcomers finished in the top six last season. The winger is in his prime and could thrive in an attacking Hearts side.

Celtic new boy...Camilo Duran (R) joined Celtic from Qarabag for a reported £6m

should make a high league finish more challenging, but Fir Park should see another entertaining campaign.

PRESSURE ON CLUBS' PERFORMANCES IN EUROPE

Scotland's UEFA coefficient has fallen for three years in a row and the consequences will land next season when only the league winners go into Champions League qualifying, and the country loses a place in European competition altogether.

The damage will be financial as well as reputational, with prize money and revenue lost to the Scottish game but with most clubs pivoting to a player trading model, there's also a blow in lost opportunity to showcase talent in the biggest shop windows.

Rebuilding the coefficient and climbing the continental rankings can only come from improved results, and this season's representatives carry the pressure and responsibility of arresting the decline. Getting it right will benefit the whole league.

> Hearts got closer than anyone in 40 years and their reward was seeing manager and captain reinforce the duopoly they threatened

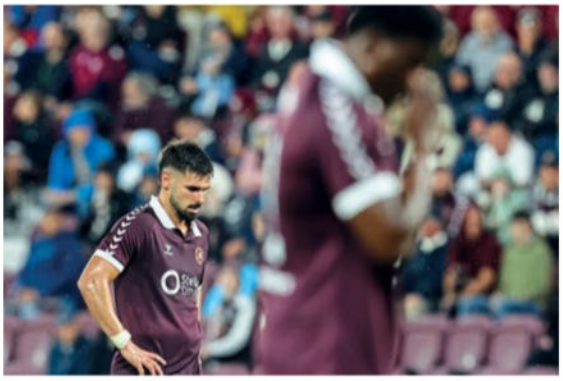
STEELMEN AIM TO BUILD ON ASKOU'S STRONG FOUNDATION

Under coach Jens Berthel Askou, Motherwell embraced a revolution in playing style last season, with former Celtic striker Chris Sutton describing their brand of football as the best in Scotland or England.

The attractive, attacking approach brought a stunning fourth-place finish and European qualification, and saw previously unheralded players dominate the league's Team of the Season, but Toulouse snapped up Askou in the summer, leaving Motherwell to search for a successor.

They turned to Scandinavia again, bringing in another promising young coach in the shape of ex-Rosenborg boss Alfred Johansson, and early indications are that the Swede is in no rush to tear up the blueprint. Competition from Hibs and Aberdeen

Dumped out... dejected Hearts players after their Champions League qualifying defeat to Sturm Graz



ALL CHANGE AT HAMPDEN

Steve Clarke's resignation as national team boss following a disappointing World Cup ended an era for Scotland in which he masterminded a return to major tournaments. Add to that the exit of Under-21s coach Scot Gemmill and there's a feeling that it's the start of a new chapter at Hampden, with the country building towards co-hosting the next Euros in 2028.

Though the vast majority of the squad that travelled to North America will still be in contention in two years' time, change opens the door for others to stake a claim and that is certain to bring added motivation for homegrown players in the Premiership this season.

Andy Coyle

EXCITING TITLE RACES ON THE HORIZON

Eyes on the prize ...Fenerbahce are desperate to end Galatasaray's Turkish league dominance

TURKEY

Since the founding of the Turkish league, the country's Big Three of Galatasaray, Fenerbahce and Besiktas have ruled the roost. Although upstarts like Trabzonspor – now with marquee signing Mo Salah in tow – and Istanbul Basaksehir are far from lightweights, the smart money has to be on another elite coronation in 2026-27. Fenerbahce, runners-up last season, will take heart from the fact that they pushed record champions Galatasaray all the way, and to try to turn the tables have spent lavishly on English forward Mason Greenwood (ex-Marseille), versatile Dutchman Nathan Ake (Manchester City) and Belgium's record goalscorer Romelu Lukaku from Napoli.

SWITZERLAND

Just a few months after unfashionable newly-promoted outfit FC Thun sent shockwaves through Swiss football by running away with their first-ever top-flight title, the possibility of a repeat performance is remote. Somewhat inevitably, the club from the Bernese Oberland were raided left and right in the close season, with inspirational coach Mauro Lustrinelli departing for Bundesliga side Union Berlin and three of their most productive scorers, Elmin Rastoder (now with Panathinaikos), Leonardo Bertone (Luzern) and Kastriot Imeri (Young Boys) heading for the exit-door too. New head coach Gian-Luca Privitelli and outstanding director of sport Dominik Albrecht need a miracle, a second in quick succession, to keep this ship afloat.

AUSTRIA

Red Bull Salzburg, perennial winners of the Austrian title in the 21st century, now find themselves in the unfamiliar position of struggling with a new, frustrating reality. Prior to the most recent top-flight campaign – when they finished third – the Salzburger had not once finished outside the top two in 21 years in the portfolio of the Red Bull energy drink company. Now the pressure is on to try to regain that dominance, a mission fraught with complications for new coach Danny Rohl, who was in charge of Rangers last season. Rohl basically has to build anew from the bottom up, left terribly short of options after haemorrhaging top talent these past few weeks, the exodus led by the brilliant likes of French centre-back Joane Gadou and Bosnian winger Kerim Alajbegovic.

GREECE

Fans of reigning Greek champions AEK Athens may take some time to shake off the transfer market blues in the wake of the recent sale of deep-lying playmaker Orbelin Pineda to Monterrey in his native Mexico. Pineda, rightly voted the Greek Super League's Player of the Season for 2025-26, was the brains, heart and soul of the Yellow-and-Blacks. In better news for the AEK faithful, Croatia attacking midfielder Lovro Majer, formerly with Wolfsburg in Germany, has jumped on board.

AEK new boy...Croatia midfielder Lovro Majer

DENMARK

Copenhagen and Midtjylland are the favourites among the pundits to triumph in the Danish Superliga. For Copenhagen, much will depend on the well-being of front-running duo Jordan Larsson and ex-Borussia Dortmund tyro Youssoufa Moukoko, while Midtjylland continue to heavily rely on the axis made up of Icelandic keeper Elias Olafsson, centre-back Mads Bech Sorensen and free-scoring Guinea-Bissau striker Franculino Dju. Aarhus club AGF, who claimed their first league title in 40 years in 2025-26, remain competitive, well-drilled and potent when attacking in wide areas, but will badly miss adventurous right-back Henrik Dalsgaard, who opted to hang up his boots at the age of 36.

CROATIA

Only twice in the last two decades have Dinamo Zagreb failed to clinch the Croatian league crown and it's nigh on impossible to imagine their empire crumbling any time soon. So dominant were the Blues last term that they ended the campaign a whopping 18 points ahead of runners-up Hajduk Split and in striker Dion Drena Beljo, who accumulated no fewer than 31 domestic league goals in 2025-26, they boast a veritable goal machine. Watch out for Dinamo's Luka Stojkovic, 22, the best up-and-coming attacking midfielder in the country.

CZECH REPUBLIC

Expect another capital city duel for pre-eminence in the Czech Republic, where current champions Slavia Prague and cross-town arch-rivals Sparta – who came second last season – will lock horns. Sparta were especially keen to refresh their line-up and believe they have done so with the recruitment of Norwegian centre-forward Jonatan Braut Brunes (previously with Polish club Rakow Czestochowa) and Costa Rica winger Josimar Alcocer, picked up from Westerlo in Belgium.

Nick Bidwell

MAJOR CLUBS
MAJOR REBUILDS

Across Europe, change is afoot. Both on and off the pitch, some of the most famous clubs in world football find themselves in unchartered territory as they go into the 2026-27 season.

Between them, the teams in the following pages have been crowned kings of Europe on no fewer than 39 occasions, yet all find themselves in need of an overhaul to varying degrees. Some have turned to familiar faces from the past in an attempt to find some stability, while others have rolled the dice with something completely new.

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Real Madrid

'There are swords being sharpened and scores waiting to be settled'

Back at the Madrid helm...Mourinho during pre-season

Sequels are often underwhelming let downs, but at Real Madrid that has not been the case in recent years. Both Carlo Ancelotti and Zinedine Zidane have made impactful returns to the Bernabeu hot seat this decade, with Carletto winning the Champions League in his second tenure and Zizou claiming the La Liga crown. Now Jose Mourinho will aim to replicate the success of two men whose initial spells as Madrid boss both came after the Portuguese coach's turbulent first stint.

The good news for everyone is that Mourinho has mellowed – at least, we think he has.

The 63-year-old did not have an official presentation – an unprecedented rejection of public duties for a new Real Madrid manager – and as such we have heard precious little from him since his arrival in the Spanish capital. There are without doubt though, swords being sharpened and scores bubbling away waiting to be settled among the Spanish press, with whom he endured the most fractious relationship of any *Los Blancos* coach in recent memory.

That might have something to do with his reticence at a public unveiling, and the Mourinho playbook has long since thrived on creating a common enemy and defiantly doubling down in the face of adversity. It was certainly on display in February following the incident between Vinicius Junior and Gianluca Prestianni during the Real Madrid v Benfica Champions League tie. Mourinho attempted to turn the focus on Vinicius' goal celebration,

Tensions ...Mourinho confronts Vinicius during February's Benfica v Real Madrid clash

Under fire...Fede Valverde and Jude Bellingham were subject to fans' jeers

Real Madrid president...Florentino Perez

an attitude which subsequently seemed to have quelled any talk of a potential return to the record 15-time European champions.

Yet here we are.

On the pitch, Mourinho takes over a team who have been domestically dominated by Barcelona, and for Real Madrid to go two years without any trophies is utterly unacceptable. This is both good and bad for Mourinho; bad obviously because he's up against an extremely strong Catalan unit under Hansi Flick, but good because it tempers expectations among Madrid supporters. They just want to win and if you offered *Madridistas* 38 1-0 La Liga victories this term, the majority would unblinkingly accept.

Mourinho's biggest achievement in his first spell was wresting the league title from one of the best Barcelona teams in history during the 2011-12 campaign. They did it in spectacular fashion, racking up 100 points and scoring 121 goals, and supporters would love to see some of that magic restored at the Bernabeu where last season Madrid played some desperately dreary football. Too often the side looked devoid of any kind of structure or identity and even if Mourinho can't reproduce the devastating football of his peak, a team with a clear idea of how it wants to play would be a good start.

The Bernabeu crowd also wants to see more visible efforts from its superstars. Much of the negative discourse from the 2025-26 season centred around having two players (namely Vinicius Junior and Kylian Mbappe) who do not help out defensively. There were also whistles and jeers for the likes of Fede Valverde, Jude Bellingham and Dean Huijsen, and reversing this perceived lack of hard work is one of the key areas where Mourinho should be able to help.

But none of this answers the question of why Mourinho has returned to Real Madrid, 13 years after leaving under a cloud, at a point when his managerial stock has never been lower?

The answer lies in a romanticised vision of the coach which has remained with Florentino Perez since 2013. The way Mourinho got the better of Barcelona, while also defending the club and his players, has always stuck with Perez. Over the last decade, Madrid's club president has become increasingly more entrenched, involved in high-profile battles with La Liga, the Spanish federation, UEFA and many others.

As Real Madrid TV continues to broadcast weekly videos criticising referees before they have even officiated *Los Blancos'* matches, bringing back a manager who will passionately protect the club's interests is seemingly very much in keeping with Perez's policy.

Phil Kitromilides

HEAD **COACH**

Jose MOURINHO

Age: 63 *(26.01.63)*
Appointed: June 2026
Previous clubs: Benfica, Uniao de Leiria, Porto, Chelsea, Internazionale, Real Madrid, Chelsea, Manchester United, Tottenham Hotspur, Roma, Fenerbahce, Benfica

SUMMER **BUSINESS**

In: Marc Cucurella *(Chelsea)*, Ibrahima Konate *(Liverpool)*, Bernardo Silva *(Manchester City)*, Denzel Dumfries *(Internazionale)*, Carlos Espi (*Levante*), Yan Diomande (*RB Leipzig*)

Out: Gonzalo Garcia *(Fulham)*, Fran Garcia *(Real Betis)*, Franco Mastantuono *(Fiorentina, loan)*, Dani Ceballos *(released)*, David Alaba *(released)*, Dani Carvajal *(released)*

Chelsea

'A meticulous winner'

As Xabi Alonso begins his root-and-branch task of reviving Chelsea after a shambolic tenth-place finish in the English top flight last season, much will depend on the lines of communication the Basque boss establishes with his Stamford Bridge charges.

At Bayer Leverkusen, where he sensationally broke Bayern Munich's 11-year domination of the Bundesliga in 2023-24, Alonso had no problem at all creating a magical working chemistry with the BayArena squad, with all and sundry almost instantly buying into his philosophy of synchronised control, tactical and positional intelligence, aggressive high press, counter-attacking flair and never-say-die spirit.

Should the same process of osmosis take place at Chelsea, an upgrade is likely, though not a given. If certain players rebel, as was the case during his short-lived spell in charge at Real Madrid last term, only a dead-end awaits.

Alonso will not alter his unpretentious leadership style at the Chelsea controls. Totally unaffected by all the honours he collected as a world-class regulating midfielder for Liverpool, Real Madrid, Bayern and Spain, he remains the most down-to-earth and modest of characters, much more concerned with the granular substance of coaching than the media spotlight and headline-grabbing pronouncements. A meticulous winner, Alonso has no truck with inconsistency or lack of hunger. Those who fail to deliver in those areas have no future with him.

The most hands-on Chelsea boss for years, Alonso will not only be in the thick of it on the training ground, but will also enjoy a huge amount of operational freedom, most notably in terms of transfers. As well as taking an axe to the club's heavily over-manned squad, two of his top recruitment targets, playmaker Morgan Rogers and France centre-back Maxence Lacroix, duly signed on the dotted line. A sure sign of a new and improved spine for the Blues.

Rogers, lured from Aston Villa for £117 million – a fee that makes him the most expensive English player of all time – is a No.10 of rare ability, excellent in the pocket behind the main striker, while French centre-back Lacroix, 26, arguably one of the best one-on-one defenders in the Premier League, looks good value at £52 million.

For the last three or four years, Chelsea have tended to exclusively sign up-and-coming talent and Alonso, once a junior and B team coach at

Experienced acquisition...Jordan Henderson

HEAD COACH

Xabi **ALONSO**

Age: 44 *(25.11.81)*
Appointed: July 2026
Previous clubs: Real Sociedad B, Bayer Leverkusen, Real Madrid

SUMMER BUSINESS

In: Morgan Rogers *(Aston Villa)*, Maxence Lacroix (*Crystal Palace*), Marco Palestra *(Atalanta)*, Geovany Quenda *(Sporting)*, Valentin Barco *(Strasbourg)*, Emmanuel Emegha *(Strasbourg)*, Pep Chavarria *(Rayo Vallecano)*, Danny Welbeck *(Brighton)*, Jordan Henderson *(Brentford)*

Out: Marc Cucurella *(Real Madrid)*, Andrey Santos *(Manchester United)*, Trevoh Chalobah (*Como*), Tyrique George *(Everton)*, Alejandro Garnacho *(Aston Villa, loan)*, Filip Jorgensen *(Strasbourg, loan)*

New Chelsea boss ...Xabi Alonso

Real Madrid, loves the energy and enthusiasm of the younger set.

But he has also been clear that a few old heads are needed too. The most influential player in his title-winning side at Leverkusen was the ultra-competitive Granit Xhaka, then aged 30. On the ball more than anyone else in that Leverkusen team, Xhaka effectively set the tone for the whole side – hence why the Blues lodged an offer with Sunderland for the Swiss playmaker earlier this summer. When that failed, they turned instead to Jordan Henderson, a different type of midfield commander but an experienced older head nonetheless.

At times, Chelsea's young pups have resembled a rabble of inexperienced naivety. With the correct guidance from Alonso, Henderson and fellow veteran signing Danny Welbeck, something of entirely more substance may emerge.

Nick Bidwell

Benfica

'Even the greatest Portuguese manager of all time could not halt the slide'

Local boy... Marco Silva

Forget France. Forget Germany. If there is a major football country in Europe that should be a one-team league, it is Portugal.

As an uncommon passion for the game took a firm grip on the country in the post-war years, Benfica built a hegemonic dynasty. Led by the brilliant Eusebio, the Lisbon outfit not only became the best club in the land, but the strongest one on the whole continent, reaching five European Cup finals in the 1960s, twice lifting the trophy.

The remarkable success spawned a massive fanbase as Portugal morphed into a football-obsessed country. It is said that of the 11 million population of Portugal, six million are Benfica fans.

It is only logical that such a large shark in a small pond should eat up its competitors, right? Wrong.

Whether through mismanagement at the top, the insupportable pressure to win, or the constant bombardment of different voices saying what is going wrong (and how to put it right), Benfica have underachieved to a shocking degree in recent decades.

At the turn of the century, the club went through what is commonly referred to as "its Vietnam" – a disastrous era in which only bad things happened – during which time it failed to win a single championship in ten years. As of the start of the 2026-27 season, having lifted the league title just once in the last seven years, some Benfica fans are calling the current epoch "our new Vietnam."

Even the greatest Portuguese manager of all time could not halt the slide. Jose Mourinho's second stint at the Estadio Da Luz resulted in zero trophies and a third-place finish despite going the entire league campaign unbeaten.

Standing on increasingly shaky ground, club president Rui Costa has appointed Marco Silva to try to reverse fortunes. The likeable Silva first made his name 30 miles down the Lisbon coast at Estoril, his brilliant work getting the modest club promoted, then into Europe twice, earning him a move to the capital at Sporting. His time in the green half of Lisbon was brief, but Silva went on to burnish his reputation at Olympiacos in Greece, and above all in England.

Still in his 40s, Silva's calm, professional demeanour masks a steely determination that was exemplified in the magnificent job he did over many seasons at Fulham, first guiding the Cottagers to the promised land of the Premier League then firmly establishing the club in the world's most competitive top flight.

It would be ironic if, after casting the net far and wide for both foreign and Portuguese managers, it is a local boy back in his home city who is the one to bring the glory days back to Benfica.

Tom Kundert

HEAD **COACH**

Marco SILVA

Age: 49 *(12.07.77)*
Appointed: June 2026
Previous clubs: Estoril, Sporting, Olympiacos, Hull City, Watford, Everton, Fulham

SUMMER **BUSINESS**

In: Heorhiy Sudakov *(Shakhtar Donetsk)*, Jakub Kaminski (Cologne), Enzo Barrenechea *(Aston Villa)*, Gabriel Indio *(Athletic Minas Gerais)*, Jhon Duran *(Al Nassr, loan)*, Clement Lenglet *(Atletico Madrid, loan)*

Out: Orkun Kokcu *(Besiktas)*, Antonio Silva *(Bournemouth)*, Nicolas Otamendi *(River Plate)*, Florentino (*Burnley*), Sidny Lopes Cabral *(Trabzonspor)*, Rodrigo Rego (*Brighton*)

Milan

Amorim: 'I'm not here to play but to win'

New appointment... Ruben Amorim during his Milan unveiling

Becoming Serie A champions is the target that Ruben Amorim has set for Milan this season in spite of the turbulent summer the club has endured.

"I'm not here to play, but to win the second star," the Portuguese head coach announced on his arrival, referring to the stars worn on players' shirts when their team has won ten titles. Milan won the last of their 19 *Scudetti* five seasons ago under Stefano Pioli, but have failed to make a sustained title challenge since then.

When Amorim was appointed in June, the club had sacked its entire senior staff while their star player, Rafael Leao, hinted at a departure. The rest of the squad, meanwhile, was still demoralised by squandering a Champions League place through a late-season collapse in form.

Nonetheless, he cited the chance to lead a club of the *Rossoneri's* stature to the title as a reason for taking the role.

"Having a club like Milan, when the club hasn't been winning the title, was the challenge I wanted," Amorim said. "I know that it's a big challenge, but if we can do it, it'll be more than a title. It'll be part of the history of a club with an iconic name."

Amorim's swift recruitment as Max Allegri's successor has been part of a restructuring of Milan's management in the wake of their failure to secure a top-four finish in Serie A.

Staying put...Luka Modric

HEAD COACH

Ruben **AMORIM**

Age: 41 *(27.01.85)*
Appointed: June 2026
Previous clubs: Casa Pia, Braga, Sporting, Manchester United

SUMMER BUSINESS

In: Goncalo Ramos *(PSG)*, Mario Gila *(Lazio)*
Out: Alvaro Morata (*Como*), Maximilian Ibrahimovic (*AZ*), Alessandro Longoni *(PSG)*, Chaka Traore *(Partizan Belgrade)*, Ismael Bennacer (*released*)

RedBird Capital Partners, the US investment firm that owns the club, also dismissed the chief executive, sporting director and technical director within 24 hours of the end of last season. Massimo Calvelli has since been appointed chief executive officer, while RedBird managing partner Gerry Cardinale has taken on a more hands-on role with a support staff promoted from within.

Amorim himself will have a say in player recruitment, and the owners have backed their head coach in the transfer window.

To lead the line, a club-record €74m fee has been invested in Portugal striker Goncalo Ramos, who scored 45 goals in three seasons at European champions Paris Saint-Germain. Spanish defender Mario Gila has also arrived, from Lazio, for a fee of €30m.

The prospect of further signings this summer has partly hinged on the departure of players, notably Rafael Leao, with Milan reportedly looking to recoup at least €50m from his sale. Amid the rumours, the Portugal forward vented his frustration on social media in early August: "Just to avoid any form of speculation and stories that aren't true, I repeat that for some time I've assigned all my interests exclusively to my family and my lawyers. Nobody else is authorised to speak for me. My mind is on the next objectives." His post was accompanied with a photo of him training with the *Rossoneri*.

On the training ground, Amorim has been changing the playing style. He wants a more aggressive press and to defend with a higher line.

In his preferred 3-4-2-1 system, two of Milan's biggest names are expected to play major roles. In the summer, France midfielder Adrien Rabiot confirmed his commitment to the club, while Luka Modric has signed for another season. From October, when he brings down the curtain on an extraordinary international career, the Croatian, who turns 41 in September, will focus solely on Milan.

Greg Whelan

Milan's record signing...Ramos in pre-season

Juventus

'In the boardroom and on the pitch, Juventus have made significant moves'

Juventus boss... Luciano Spalletti

Juventus fans are girding their loins in the wake of a desperately disappointing 2025-2026 season which saw Italy's most successful club (36 Serie A titles) go without any silverware, at home or abroad. Worse still, Juve failed to qualify for the Champions League, finishing sixth in Serie A, two points behind the remarkable first-time qualifiers Como and one behind eternal rival, Milan. It was left to the Juventus women's team to save club honour by winning the club's only silverware of the campaign – the SuperCoppa in January.

There was a time, even quite recently, when Juve fans could take Champions League qualification almost for granted. Nine consecutive Serie A titles between 2012 and 2020 saw them not only qualify nine times but also reach two Champions League finals, losing in 2015 to Barcelona and in 2017 to Real Madrid. Are those days gone or can a much-changed club, both on the pitch and in the boardroom, fight its way back into the European limelight via the Europa League?

All the signs would suggest that the Old Lady will come out fighting in the new season, albeit with a programme more concentrated on the domestic front, with the major aim obviously being Champions League qualification.

Both in the boardroom and on the pitch itself, Juventus have made some significant moves. The confirmation that ex-Italy coach Luciano Spalletti would continue in his role, the appointment of club icon defender Giorgio Chiellini in the new role of chief club affairs officer alongside new chief of football Frederic Massara, a man who has worked with both Milan and Roma, would suggest that a serious new structure may be forming itself.

On the pitch, two purchases thus far stand out: France striker Randal Kolo Muani from Paris Saint-Germain and Bosnian winger Kerim Alajbegovic from Bayer Leverkusen. More transfer action seems likely to follow.

Last winter, the Agnelli family, historic owners of both Juve and car manufacturer FIAT, caused a panic when announcing that after 100 years of ownership, the reputable Turin daily newspaper *La Stampa* would be sold. Commentators began to ask if, in these fast and changing times, all the Agnelli "family jewels" were potentially up for sale.

Yet last December, when the family holding company and controlling shareholder Exor received a takeover bid from Crypto company Tether, an offer implying an equity valuation of €1.1 billion, it was quickly rejected. Some things are not for sale.

Paddy Agnew

HEAD COACH

Luciano **SPALLETTI**

Age: 67 *(07.03.59)*
Appointed: October 2025
Previous clubs: Empoli, Sampdoria, Venezia, Udinese, Ancona, Udinese, Roma, Zenit, Roma, Internazionale, Napoli, Italy

SUMMER BUSINESS

In: Randal Kolo Muani *(PSG)*, Kerim Alajbegovic *(Leverkusen)*, Jeff Ekhator *(Genoa)*, Jeremy Boga *(Nice)*, Zeki Celik *(Roma)*
Out: Filip Kostic *(PSV)*, Dusan Vlahovic *(Besiktas)*, Timothy Weah *(Marseille)*, Lois Openda *(Lyon, loan)*, David Puczka *(Genoa)*, Joao Mario *(Fiorentina, loan)*, Giovanni Daffara *(Parma)*, Facundo Gonzalez *(Racing Santander)*

Manchester City

'Successfully replacing Guardiola will be a tough ask'

New Manchester City boss...Enzo Maresca

Big shoes to fill...Maresca was Pep Guardiola's assistant at Manchester City in 2022-23

Pep Guardiola's departure sees Manchester City become the latest club in English football having to contend with something more significant than a simple managerial change.

Guardiola defined the football aspect of the club in the way few figures in the game can. He brought success but also brought identity and style, and his departure leaves a void in the entire organisation.

A handful of other clubs have had to deal with the end of a legendary manager's tenure, and it's a difficult situation to come through successfully, with City's neighbours Manchester United an example of how difficult it can be as they struggled post-Alex Ferguson.

Liverpool (Jurgen Klopp) and Arsenal (Arsene Wenger) have had to contend with similar situations in the past decade, and now it's City's turn.

City might be better equipped to deal with it than most given their resources, and the fact they have a sense of continuation around their style of play with new manager Enzo Maresca. But successfully replacing Guardiola will still be a tough ask.

Even before he arrived in Manchester, City had been laying the groundwork for Guardiola to become not only their manager but also a figurehead for the club and its football. Work was being done in the background during the tenure of his predecessor, Manuel Pellegrini, adding another layer of difficulty to the Chilean's day-to-day work, especially when it came to dealing with media speculation. That, though, was nowhere near as difficult a task as the one facing Guardiola's successor.

Maresca is not an abrupt departure, and the succession looks even more sensible given that the charismatic Italian managed City's academy team and assisted Guardiola before moving on to forge a career as a first-team manager with Parma, Leicester City and then Chelsea.

City are getting a manager whose style of play is based heavily on control of the game through possession. The Premier League continues to be a coming together of coaching ideas at the top level, with different levels and styles of positionism, pressing and possession going head to head in a league that has the resources to attract the world's best players to implement these ideas on the pitch. It's a battleground for top coaches and their ideas as much as it is for top players. Guardiola himself was continually evolving and trying new things, often successfully, to keep City at the peak of European football. Though Maresca is an obvious Guardiola replacement, the question is whether he has the innovative ideas to go with the underlying philosophy to keep City ahead of the pack.

Possession alone is not enough, and the real test for Maresca will come in finding that extra edge in other areas to turn the control of games into the winning of games.

James Nalton

HEAD COACH

Enzo **MARESCA**

Age: 46 *(10.02.80)*
Appointed: June 2026
Previous clubs: Parma, Leicester City, Chelsea

SUMMER BUSINESS

In: Elliot Anderson *(Nottingham Forest)*, Mathys Detourbet *(Troyes)*, Geronimo Rulli *(Marseille)*, Jeremy Monga *(Leicester City)*, Pierce Charles *(Sheffield Wednesday)*

Out: Bernardo Silva *(Real Madrid)*, John Stones *(Inter)*, James Trafford *(Leeds)*, Nathan Ake *(Fenerbahce)*, Reigan Heskey *(Cologne)*, Mathys Detourbet *(Monaco, loan)*, Manuel Akanji *(Inter)*

Liverpool

'Revamp on the pitch, transition off the pitch'

You'll Never Walk Alone...Andoni Iraola at his Reds unveiling

Changes at Liverpool are coming in the form of a revamp on the pitch and what they hope will be a smooth period of transition off it. They will aim to return to challenging for top honours domestically and in Europe, while likely also appointing a new sporting director at some point in the next year.

The club are searching not only for an improvement on last season's fifth-place Premier League finish but also for a return to an exciting, energetic brand of football that defined them during Jurgen Klopp's tenure. In an attempt to deliver both of these going forward, they have turned to the former Rayo Vallecano and Bournemouth manager Andoni Iraola.

Things had gone stale quickly under outgoing manager Arne Slot, and results had suffered. The Dutchman deserves more credit than he gets for fine-tuning Klopp's team into Premier League champions once again in 2024-25, but the team had lost its identity and verve last season.

Though Iraola has his own methods, there are similarities to Klopp in that he tends towards disruption of the opposition and more direct attacking play as much as, if not more than, possession-oriented control.

One immediate challenge for Iraola will be the change in expectations from a club such as Bournemouth, whom he had playing far above their usual level, to a club like Liverpool who are expected to challenge for trophies on all fronts. Indeed, his opening months on the south coast were testing as his ideas took time to set in. It was more than worth the wait for the Cherries – but there won't be as much patience at Anfield.

His Bournemouth side had become one of the best in the Premier League outside of the usual names pushing for the title and Champions League qualification. They often looked to be playing a level above those higher-profile teams, too, and almost beat Iraola's new club to a Champions League spot at the end of the 2025-26 campaign.

Reds new boy... Ronald Araujo

The Basque boss goes from managing a team for whom qualifying for the Europa League was a best-ever season, to one that is expected to dominate every opponent they face. But though poor results will be heavily scrutinised, it is likely Iraola will be given time if the style of play returns to a more entertaining brand of football more closely resembling that which fans had become used to under Klopp.

Off the pitch, Michael Edwards' departure marked another significant change for Liverpool ahead of the new season. That said, his most recent role had not been the same as that which he held during the Klopp era, for which he received plaudits for the club's highly successful recruitment.

Edwards' second stint was a bigger-picture job that included overseeing an expansion of FSG into a multi-club ownership group. The abandoning of that plan after a couple of failed attempts to buy clubs in Europe meant there was no longer a need for someone in the position.

Sporting director Richard Hughes remains at Liverpool in the role Edwards held during his first stint at the club, but there could be a period of transition on the recruitment side of things as Hughes himself is not expected to sign a new deal to remain at Anfield beyond 2027.

Liverpool hope Iraola brings some stability on the pitch so they can oversee a smooth transition off it.

James Nalton

HEAD COACH

Andoni **IRAOLA**

Age: 44 *(22.06.82)*
Appointed: June 2026
Previous clubs: AEK Larnaca, Mirandes, Rayo Vallecano, Bournemouth

SUMMER BUSINESS

In: Jeremy Jacquet *(Rennes)*, Ronald Araujo *(Barcelona, loan)*, Victor Munoz *(Osasuna)*

Out: Ibrahima Konate *(Real Madrid)*, Mohamed Salah *(Trabzonspor)*, Andy Robertson *(Spurs)*

Ajax

Cruyff: 'Ajax need to win titles'

Sweeping changes... Ajax director of football Jordi Cruyff

Explosive...Ajax fans cause their clash with Groningen to be abandoned

The most famous club in the Netherlands has had its fair share of low points in the last few years. In 2023-24, Ajax finished fifth, their worst season in 24 years. Twelve months later they came second, but only after throwing away a nine-point lead when the finish line was in sight. Last season they slumped back down to fifth, with the nadir coming in November when a firework display from their supporters forced their match with Groningen to be abandoned and replayed in front of an empty stadium a few days later.

A European place was, at least, salvaged by winning the Conference League play-off, but this is a club that demands much, much more. They have now been without a national title since the highly successful partnership of technical director Marc Overmars and head coach Erik ten Hag was broken up for various reasons in 2022.

Now, attempts to bring back the glory days are being led by the most famous name in the club's history: Cruyff, with Jordi, the son of the late, great Johan, appointed technical director in February.

Although Cruyff junior was born in Amsterdam and gained nine caps for the Dutch national team, he never played in the Eredivisie, grew up in Barcelona and played for *Los Cules*. Even his name is Catalan, chosen by Johan in honour of Catalonia's patron saint.

It is perhaps no surprise then that under his watch, Ajax have undergone something of a Spanish revolution, appointing a Spanish head coach, hiring an entire Spanish coaching staff, and signing players with Spanish league experience.

Cruyff's first act was to install his former Barca team-mate and friend Oscar Garcia as interim coach, although with limited success.

That might have been the end of the Spanish experiment but, in fact, it was just the start. For this season, Cruyff hired Miguel Angel Sanchez Munoz, better known as Michel. The 50-year-old played at Rayo Vallecano nearly his entire career, and as a coach has a somewhat mixed track record. With Rayo Vallecano, Huesca and Girona, he won promotion to La Liga but was then sacked by the first two after landing in the relegation zone, and with Girona he actually sank into the Segunda Division.

However, he is also known for the 2023-2024 campaign when Girona shared the lead in La Liga halfway through the season and then finished third, claiming a Champions League ticket.

"Ajax need to win titles," Cruyff said at his presentation, making clear that he won't accept any transitional years. He is using his previous experience at Maccabi Tel Aviv as a blueprint. When he arrived in 2012, the Israeli club hadn't won the title for nine years. Under his reign, Maccabi were champions three years in a row.

At least Michel can feel at home away from home. Cruyff dumped the Dutch assistants to bring in Alberto Garrido, Juanvi Peinado and goalkeeper coach Juan Carlos Balaguer as new recruits. For the reserve team, which plays in the league below, Carlos Garcia is at the helm along with goalkeeping coach Juan Pablo Colinas.

And in the transfer market the eye was also fixed on the Iberian peninsula. Experienced defender Daley Blind is back for his third spell at the Amsterdam club and, having played under Michel for Girona, the former Netherlands international will be hugely influential in implementing the coach's ideas.

Also arriving are Caio Henrique, a 29-year-old Brazilian left-back from Monaco who was once on the books at Atletico Madrid, and experienced goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen. The German lost his place at Barcelona due to injury and went on loan to Girona last year but only made two appearances due to another injury setback.

In attack, the marquee signing is not from La Liga but the Saudi Pro League. Marcos Leonardo, a former Santos and Benfica striker, has spent the last one and a half seasons with Al Hilal, scoring 30 goals in 51 league matches. He has cost Ajax a reported fee of €20m.

It is obvious that Cruyff is banking on experienced players at a club that is known around the world for its youth development. But he is taking a huge risk. How much does the Spanish armada know about the Eredivisie, the Dutch football culture and the various factions within the club that so often turns out to be a snake pit?

Time will tell if Cruyff is on the right track or if this is simply another dead end in Amsterdam.

Klaas-Jan Droppert

In Michel, whom he has admired for a long time, Cruyff believes he has the perfect coach for Ajax. "He is demanding and ambitious, he will project his vision and intensive methods to the team." The Spaniard, who served Girona for five years, is known for his attacking style of play and his rotating of position, a familiar way of play in Amsterdam.

New boss...Michel watches his Ajax team in action

HEAD COACH

MICHEL

Age: 50 *(30.10.75)*
Appointed: June 2026
Previous clubs: Rayo Vallecano, Huesca, Girona

SUMMER BUSINESS

In: Marc-Andre ter Stegen *(Barcelona, loan)* Marcos Leonardo *(Al Hilal)*, Caio Henrique *(Monaco)*, Tolu Arokodare *(Wolves)*, Julian Brandt *(Dortmund)*, Daley Blind *(Girona)*
Out: Sean Steur *(Newcastle)*, Chuba Akpom *(Ipswich)*, Sivert Mannsverk *(Sparta Prague)*, Branco van den Boomen *(Angers)*, Takehiro Tomiyasu *(Crystal Palace)*, Wout Weghorst *(Twente)*, Oleksandr Zinchenko *(released)*

ROMANIA

League FOCUS

Romanian champions... Universitatea Craiova

2026-27 TEAMS

- Arges Pitesti
- Botosani
- CFR Cluj
- Corvinul Hunedoara
- Csikszereda Miercurea Ciuc
- Dinamo Bucharest
- Farul Constanta
- FCSB
- Otelul Galati
- Petrolul Ploiesti
- Rapid Bucharest
- Sepsi OSK
- Universitatea Cluj
- Universitatea Craiova
- UTA Arad
- Voluntari

SUPERLIGA – A BRIEF HISTORY

What started as a competition involving just three clubs in December 1909 soon spread across the country. In 1921, a nationwide league of seven clubs was established, replacing the regional system that had previously been in place. In 1932, the league expanded to 14, with a second tier introduced in 1934. When the competition resumed after the Second World War, the league format underwent only minor changes. The main variation came in the number of clubs competing in the top flight, alternating between 16, 18 and 14 teams. In 2015, the play-off/play-out format was introduced, with the league reduced from 18 to 14 clubs, before expanding again to 16 in 2020.

THE FORMAT

The 16 participating clubs play each other home and away during the regular season. After 30 rounds, the top six teams qualify for the championship play-offs and the remaining ten enter the play-outs. Points are halved, effectively giving the competition a fresh start.

The season ends with a series of play-off matches. First, the top two sides in the play-out table meet in a one-off game hosted by the highest-placed team. The winner faces the third or fourth-placed team from the championship play-offs, with a spot in the Conference League up for grabs.

At the bottom, the two lowest teams are relegated, while the next two teams enter two-legged promotion/relegation play-offs against the third and fourth-placed teams from the second-tier promotion play-off table.

HONOURS BOARD

Club	*Title wins*	*Runners-up*	*Last title*
Steaua Bucharest/FCSB	28	21	2024-25
Dinamo Bucharest	18	20	2006-07
CFR Cluj	8	2	2021-22
Venus Bucharest	7	1	1939-40
UTA Arad	6	1	1969-70
Chinezul Timisoara*	6	0	1926-27
Universitatea Craiova	5	5	2025-26

*Club no longer exists

Which Universitatea Craiova won the league-cup double in 2025-26?
Two entities currently claim to carry on the tradition of the historic Universitatea Craiova, the club that won four league titles before the early 1990s and reached the European Cup quarter-finals in 1982. The two clubs are locked in a legal battle over the rights to the club's symbols and glorious history.

The current Romanian champions have been embraced by the vast majority of the city and the wider region, but there is another Craiova: FCU 1948, led by Adrian Mititelu, a local businessman and former leader of the club's ultras, who was also in charge when the original Universitatea Craiova went bankrupt. FCU Craiova 1948, who also competed in Romania's top flight until 2024, are currently out of all competitions because of the debts they accumulated, but the club insists it will return and challenge the city's football establishment once again.

For several years, FCU 1948 were barred from playing at Craiova's main stadium because of the feud with their city rivals, but that did little to win over the public. Only modest crowds attended FCU's matches even after they were finally allowed to play at the modern Ion Oblemenco Stadium, a 31,000-seat arena inaugurated in 2017 whose design is reminiscent of Marseille's Stade Velodrome.

How does the Under-21 rule work in the Romanian Superliga?
In 2016, the Romanian Football Federation introduced a rule requiring every top-flight club to field at least one player eligible for the Romania Under-21 national team for the duration of each match. This meant that an U21 player could only be replaced by another U21 player, even in the event of an injury.

The federation was so pleased with the results that it later required clubs to start matches with two U21 players in the starting line-up, although only one had to remain on the pitch for the full 90 minutes. The decision led to farcical scenes, with some teams making substitutions just seconds after kick-off, and the requirement for two U21s was eventually scrapped.

ONE TO WATCH

Alexandru STOIAN

(FCSB)

After shining for Romania's national youth teams, from Under-15 to Under-19 level, Stoian has been monitored by several clubs across Europe. The 18-year-old spent his early years at the Gheorghe Hagi academy before Bucharest giants FCSB saw off interest from Italian side Bologna to sign him in 2025. With a sharp eye for goal, the intelligence to find space and the vision to create goalscoring chances, Stoian is a perfect blend of a No.9 and a No.10. In October 2022, he made his first-team debut for Farul Constanta at the age of 14 years, ten months and 13 days, making him the second-youngest player ever to feature in Romania's top flight.

Disputed history...fans of Steaua Bucharest watch their team in the second tier

Although the original rule still has its critics, it has had a significant impact on Romania's national teams. Romania have qualified for each of the last four European Under-21 Championships (including 2023 when they qualified automatically as co-hosts), reaching the semi-finals in 2019 after beating England and Croatia, and drawing with France.

Countries such as Serbia and Hungary have since introduced similar regulations, while FIFA announced in April that it is consulting stakeholders on a proposal to require every professional club to keep a homegrown U21 player on the pitch throughout matches.

What happened to Steaua?
A lengthy legal battle between the Romanian Army Sports Club and the club now known as FCSB left the latter without the rights to the Steaua brand and identity. Instead, a team called Steaua now competes in the second tier under the patronage of the Romanian Army.

As a state-owned club, however, Steaua are not eligible for promotion to the Superliga. They have consistently performed well enough to go up, but their legal structure does not comply with the requirements of Romania's sports legislation, leaving them stuck in the second division for the foreseeable future.

Despite the Army retaining the Steaua name and brand, FCSB continue to enjoy the backing of the vast majority of the club's historic supporters. Steaua remain the country's most popular football brand, with almost half of Romanian football fans identifying with the red and blue colours, and most transferred their support to FCSB after the split.

Which is the biggest current rivalry in the Romanian Superliga?
Historically, the biggest rivalry has been the Bucharest derby between Steaua and Dinamo, which today has evolved into FCSB v Dinamo, although games involving the capital city's third team, Rapid Bucharest are equally intense. The biggest derbies are regularly moved to the National Arena, which has a capacity of around 55,000. There hasn't been a sell-out for a Romanian derby in years, but staging matches there is still preferred because of the greater revenue it generates. The atmosphere at the National Arena is good, but nothing on Rapid's Giulesti Stadium which, despite being a modern venue, has retained an extra layer of authenticity that makes the experience more special.

Emanuel Rosu

LIGUE 3

French domestic football has undergone a restructure

Words: Luke Entwistle

One flagship project is hiding a multitude of sins in French football. While Paris Saint-Germain are "on the roof of Europe", in the words of French president Emmanuel Macron, following back-to-back Champions League triumphs, those around them are left fighting for survival. TV revenue was through the roof when Mediapro acquired the rights to broadcast Ligue 1 for €780m per season in 2020; four years and many missteps later, and it is through the floor. Between them, clubs in the top flight shared just €270m last season, down from €500m the previous season. That meagre figure will be lower still in 2026-27, and there are reasonable fears that the nadir has not yet been reached.

It is a situation that leaves even the most prestigious clubs, the likes of Marseille, Monaco and Lyon, needing to take drastic measures, and frequently. OM have one year to rebalance the books or face exclusion from European competition; a period of severe austerity has been heralded under the stewardship of new sporting director Gregory Lorenzi, known for working wonders with a limited budget at Brest. OL were almost administratively relegated to Ligue 2 in the summer of 2025, only to be saved upon appeal. Monaco, meanwhile, have always operated a trading model, but the financial struggles of French football more globally put that strategy under significant strain. There is little room for error.

Further down the pyramid, the situation is equally bleak. Bordeaux have now fallen out of professional football altogether, having been in the quarter-finals of the Champions League as recently as 2010. Last summer, a giant of Corsican football, AC Ajaccio, were administratively demoted to the seventh tier of French football. A similar fate befell Le Mans back in 2013 when they went from the second to the sixth tier. Their recent return to Ligue 1 serves as a glimmer of hope, an aspiration to those who have recently fallen through the divisions.

These dramatic falls from grace are not isolated incidents but a trend and symptoms of the illness, rather than the illness itself. "The league is extremely badly run," said RC Lens president Joseph Oughourlian in June. "The financial context of French clubs is catastrophic," he added. Oughourlian has frequently taken jabs at the Ligue de Football Professionnel (LFP), which runs Ligue 1 and Ligue 2, and its president Vincent Labrune.

But while the top of the pyramid of French football rots, the foundations are being rebuilt. It is not the LFP who are leading the way, but the French

French football HQ...the home of the French Football Federation in Paris

Football Federation (FFF). The third tier of French football, formerly known as the Championnat National, will now be named Ligue 3. There is a new logo and a new trophy, but this isn't a simple rebrand. The aforementioned context is hugely significant in what constitutes a veritable revolution in French football.

It is the first time that the FFF will be directly involved in running a league. Prior to the change, which came into force for the 2026-27 season, the third tier was an amateur division, albeit one that also featured professional and semi-professional teams. The former composition gave rise to the kind of imbalance that has become ingrained and so detrimental in Ligue 1, with those who hold professional or semi-professional status naturally advantaged, not only financially, but also by their capacity to house an academy, allowing the development of their own players.

All clubs in Ligue 3 will have a professional status and a set of universal regulations, including a salary cap. It will also permit all clubs to have an academy, which was not previously the case for all clubs competing in the division. This aspect will also be promoted, with clubs only allowed 20 contracted players not trained in their region within their squad; there is an argument that the league could go further and decrease this number. In any case, the idea is to prioritise local player development – "preserving clubs' territorial identity" – while also widening the stream of talent and allowing it to flow into local tributaries.

Speaking to scouts in France – and especially those with an intimate knowledge of the Île-de-France region – they evoke a surplus of talent.

FFF president... Philippe Diallo

"There are too many talents for clubs to use and make the most of," one told *World Soccer*. The creation of a Ligue 3 will alleviate those issues, help prevent talent drain, provide a pathway for young players to remain in France, rise up the pyramid, and eventually – as is always the case in France – be exported, usually to the Premier League or Bundesliga. The theory, therefore, is that by building stronger foundations, the rest of the French football pyramid can be stabilised, even if it would still leave clubs at the top of Ligue 1 reliant on a trading model that is inherently risky or at least unreliable.

> "The league is extremely badly run. The financial context of French clubs is catastrophic"
>
> **RC Lens president Joseph Oughourlian**

All this is reliant on the financial stability of clubs in Ligue 3. Championnat National clubs were not impervious to the ills affecting clubs further up the pyramid. FFF president Philippe Diallo revealed that €12.3m (of which 70% will be equally distributed between the 18 competing clubs) will be put into

Kylian's club...Caen, owned by Mbappe, will play in Ligue 3

the creation of Ligue 3 and emphasised the importance of "sustainability". The introduction of a salary cap is part of ensuring that.

But the rules, bar seeking to ensure financial stability, also bring much-needed standardisation that was sorely lacking at this level. That is also important for the "product" element of this new project, which will now be broadcast on *Ligue1+* (the sole domestic broadcaster of France's top flight from this season), rather than freely on YouTube, as was previously the case.

And there should be intrigue; whether it's watching Kylian Mbappe-owned SM Caen, now managed by former Arsenal and Manchester City defender Gael Clichy, attempting to return to Ligue 2, or following the success of the "Football Video Support" system, a form of VAR-lite, which will allow each manager to challenge two refereeing decisions per match. VAR critics stay tuned.

In that sense, Ligue 3 represents a laboratory for innovative ideas, and innovation is necessary. Faced with the ever-growing crisis in French football, the LFP have been creatively bankrupt; the decision to erect a league-owned broadcaster – heralded as original – was not a novel one, but the reason it was shunned in the past is the same reason it is criticised now: the money simply isn't there, at least for now.

In addition to the FFF's intervention, the government have also stepped in with a sweeping reform, which passed by a landslide vote in the National Assembly (75 votes to two) in June. It is a reform that challenges the LFP's monopoly of professional football in France and paves the way for government intervention. Diallo called the reform "vital and urgent". Time will tell if it brings about the desired result: prosperity and stability.

Times they are a changing, hopefully for the better. Ligue 3, an FFF innovation, should be refreshing; only time will tell whether it is didactic or even revolutionary. All that can be said for now is that it is different, and different is welcome in a country where the success of the national team and its flagship club paper over growing cracks.

LFP president... Vincent Labrune

FRENCH FOOTBALL PYRAMID 2026-27

1
LIGUE 1
18 clubs
2 relegation spots
1 relegation play-off spot

2
LIGUE 2
18 clubs
2 promotion spots
3 promotion play-off spots
2 relegation spots
1 relegation play-off spot

3
LIGUE 3
18 clubs
2 promotion spots
4 promotion play-off spots
3 relegation spots

4
NATIONAL 1
Group A, Group B, Group C
16 clubs each
3 promotion spots
10 relegation spots

5
NATIONAL 2
Groups A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H
14 clubs each
8 promotion spots
25 relegation spots *(down to regional leagues)*

LIGUE 3 CLUBS

Amiens
Aubagne Air Bel
Bastia
Bourg-Peronnas
Caen
Cannes
Concarneau
Fleury
La Roche-sur-Yon
Le Puy
Orleans
Paris 13 Atletico
Quevilly-Rouen
Rouen
Thionville Lusitanos
Valenciennes
Versailles
Villefranche

FROM THE CHURCH TO THE PREM

How a kid from a worn-out pitch in Split became Brighton's record signing

Words: Juraj Vrdoljak

In the heart of Split, just outside the city centre and the famous Diocletian Palace, lies a small, worn five-a-side pitch. The locals call it "The Church", due to the local church which owns the ground and overlooks it, and there you can regularly find local footballing saints – including Marko Livaja, formerly of Internazionale, Atalanta and the Croatia national team, an absolute modern legend of Hajduk Split – enjoying a kickabout just for a bit of fun. They play with the locals: the bartenders at the local cafes where they have coffees, or the shop owners who they buy groceries from.

Luka Vuskovic, the kid who took the Bundesliga by storm last season, used to play there before his breakthrough at Hajduk's academy. Back then he wore braces, and his arms weren't covered in tattoos as they are now, but his warm, childish stature did not fool anyone. He would regularly stand out in the toughest of environments, playing street football with people three times his age who were left puzzled about how to actually stop him. "His legs are like two logs," one local who faced him told *World Soccer* after one session at The Church, "but he uses them as fast as chopsticks".

It came as little surprise when young Luka joined Hajduk's academy, and not just because of his obvious ability. The link between the Vuskovic family and Hajduk is an intergenerational one. During the Second World War, his great-grandfather, Marko, was part of the partisan resistance movement that liberated Split from fascism, and later played a significant role in restarting the club's activities when the players returned from the frontline, becoming a long-serving secretary. His son, Mario – Luka's grandfather – was a player at Hajduk, winning the Yugoslav Under-19s title as part of the famous generation who, under the tutoring of the famous Tomislav Ivic, later swept Yugoslav (and European) football with their own version of total football. After his breakthrough at senior level, Mario left for the Netherlands where he signed for Go Ahead Eagles and later Heerenveen, spending six years in the country before tragically losing his life in a car accident near Split, aged only 31. But the legacy lived further on.

Daniel, his son, was born during his stint in the Netherlands, and went on to become a professional footballer himself. He only managed to stack up a few appearances for Hajduk, becoming something of a journeyman. His senior debut for Hajduk should have come in November 2001, but the big occasion had to be postponed for an even bigger one: the birth of his first-born son, whom he named Mario, to honour his tragically deceased father.

After his playing career ended, Daniel returned to Split to take up a role at the club's academy as a coach in charge of individual talent development. In that role he oversaw the rise of both Mario and his younger sibling Luka, both developing as major talents at centre-back, a position that all three generations of the Vuskovic family occupied during their careers.

Mario was first to break the Vuskovic "curse" when it comes to claiming an important role in the first team, stacking up nearly 50 appearances for Hajduk's senior side before Hamburg came with an offer to lure him away. His trajectory was on the rise in Germany, featuring regularly in a team bound for promotion back to the Bundesliga in 2022-23, until he was handed a two-year ban for failing to pass a regular doping test, later increased to four years by the Court of Arbitration for Sport. Mario appealed but will not return to football until November this year.

The timing of it all heavily influenced Luka. He was always seen as the more talented player, a generational star who was certain to aim for the biggest of the

22
22

The Church...the worn pitch in Split where Vuskovic learnt his trade as a youngster

stages in football. A kid with braces who was dropping much older players like flies, adding frequent screamers from the middle of the pitch just as a fun technical demonstration of power and an addition to his already unbelievable skillset.

When Mario learned of his fate, Luka was just about to turn 16, which is the minimum age for a young player to debut for a senior side in Croatia. His birthday is in February, which is also just around the time the season restarts after the winter break, and the first game was against Hajduk's arch-rivals Dinamo Zagreb. Luka was a starter away in Zagreb just two days after turning 16, becoming the youngest-ever player to feature for the senior side in an official game. But it was a debut to forget: Hajduk lost 4-0, suffering one of their worst-ever defeats in the derby. "You have Vuskovic as an example", Nikola Kalinic – a former Milan and Atletico Madrid striker who eventually retired at Hajduk and became a sporting director – fumed in the post-match press conference. "We were waiting for the kid's 16th birthday as if we'll never concede another goal with him in the team, and all we did was expose him in a bad way".

In hindsight, "exposing" Vuskovic was the right thing to do. From then on, every game in which he featured, now with professionals twice his age at the elite level, added further proof of his mouth-watering talent.

In Croatia, that attention usually means a suitor will come sooner rather than later. Tottenham Hotspur were the quickest to strike a deal, making him

World Cup debut... Vuskovic holds off a challenge from England winger Noni Madueke

the most expensive outbound transfer in Hajduk's history while still being young enough to play for the Under-17s. It was rumoured his move to Spurs came as part of the deal that saw Ivan Perisic head in the other direction, back to Split to play for his childhood club, but that wasn't the case. Luka was just too good to miss out on.

That was in September 2023, but it was agreed that he would not move to London until 2025. In the meantime, there would be loans in order to provide regular first-team football; first to Radomiak Radom in Poland, then Westerlo in Belgium. When he finally did join Spurs, he was quickly sent out to his brother's club, Hamburg. Still a teenager, Luka performed with enough confidence to earn a spot in the official Bundesliga Team of The Year, all while wearing the number 44 on his back, a testament to Mario overlooking him in the stands.

On July 14, it was announced that Brighton had completed the signing of Vuskovic for a reported club-record fee of £46 million

Despite those impressive displays, Zlatko Dalic, Croatia's national team coach of nine years until July, hesitated before providing Luka with his senior debut, insisting that "his time will surely come". But when he did eventually pick him, Dalic was convinced and, just as he did with Josko Gvardiol back in 2022, decided to give Luka his big breakthrough under the biggest of spotlights: the World Cup.

As the tournament progressed, rumours emerged of a move to Brighton & Hove Albion, heightened by Jan Paul van Hecke moving in the opposite direction. On July 14, it was announced that the Seagulls had completed the signing of Vuskovic for a reported club-record fee of £46 million, adding a seventh team on the CV of a player still yet to turn 20. Yet Albion fans eager to see their new recruit in action on the big stage were limited to just over an hour of action.

Ahead of the tournament, Dalic had switched to a back three in order to accommodate Vuskovic, and he stuck with that formation in the opening game against England. But after 66 minutes the plan was abandoned, Vuskovic hooked with Croatia 3-2 behind, as they reverted to a back four.

It was a moment that might have reminded people of his debut for Hajduk. But just like in that derby defeat, there were clearly wider questions around the system, and Luka nevertheless provided proof of his ability. Just before Croatia's first equaliser, Vuskovic announced his presence by stepping into midfield to assertively seize possession from Jude Bellingham and then punch the ball into the feet of Martin Baturina, who played a one-two with Petar Sucic before wrapping his finish into the top corner.

In that short sequence the story of Luka was brought to light for all to see: the kid from The Church, with the instinctive timing provided by his footballing DNA, fearless enough to take on the bigger boys and come away with the ball, always doubted but still with a warm smile and a determination to prove people wrong.

Brotherly tribute...Luka raises the Hamburg shirt number of his brother Mario

LUIS BINKS

"It's only a short career so I want to try to get the most out of it"

At just 24 years old, the English centre-back has played in four different countries, represented two different international teams at youth level and worked with the likes of Frank Lampard, Cesc Fabregas and Thierry Henry

What convinced you to join Brondby last summer?
Even when I was younger, I wanted to look back on my career and know that I'd gone out of my comfort zone and experienced different cultures and football styles. When this came up, I looked at it thoroughly. I know that they're the biggest team in Denmark. Obviously, they've struggled in recent years but they're a team that wants to win trophies, win leagues and play in Europe so the chance to try to do that was the attraction.

I've loved it. I've been quite lucky to live in some nice places – Bologna, Como, Montreal – but I'd say Copenhagen is the best. Brondby's on the outskirts but all the players live in the city. I think the lifestyle suits me. In the summer and in the winter it's like two different cities. Right now, everyone's swimming in the lake and there's a good vibe about it. The shops, cafes and restaurants are always buzzing. It's a very young and vibrant crowd.

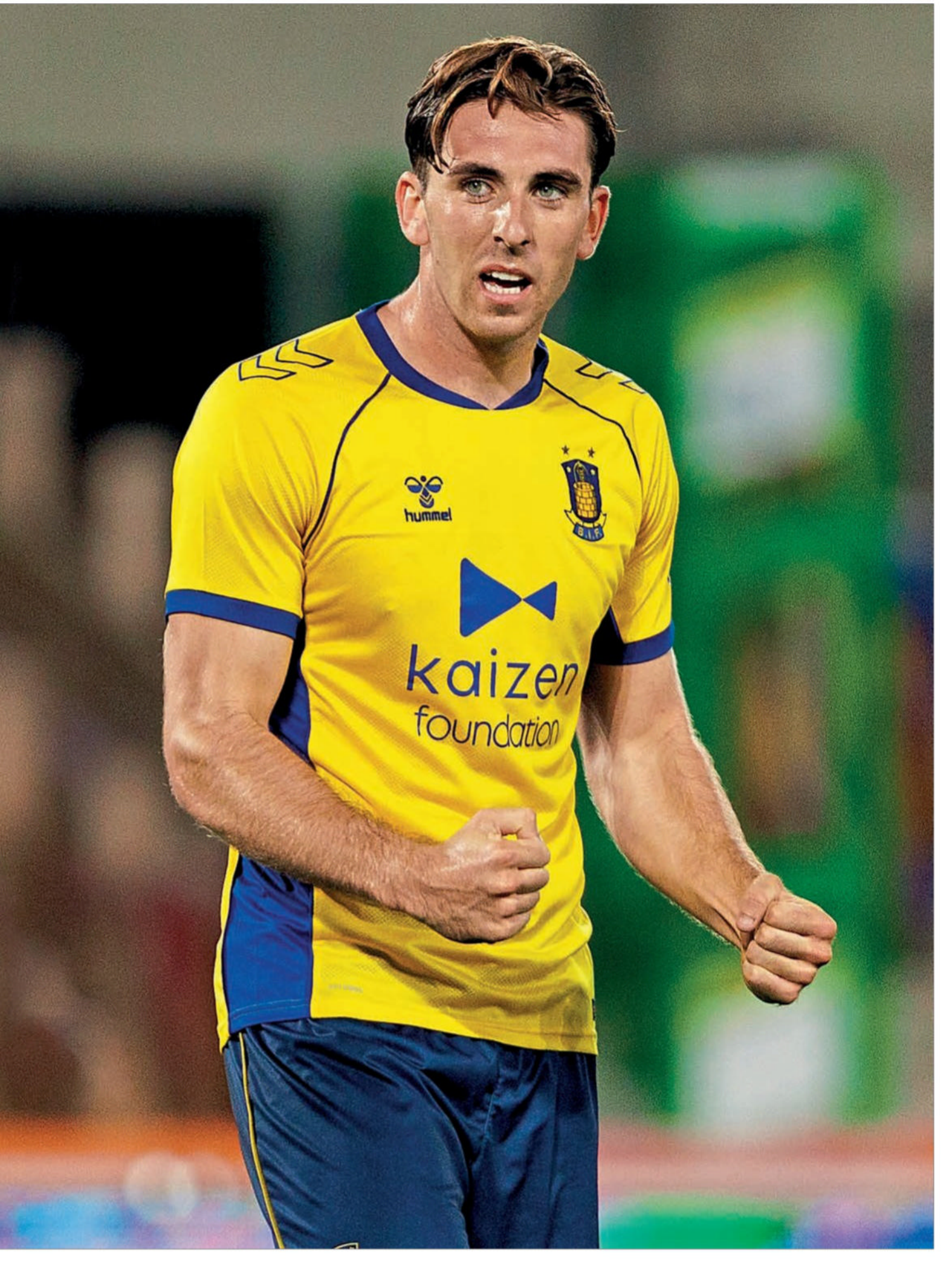
How would you assess your first season in the Danish Superliga?
Personally, it was quite a good season for me. It's never easy going to a different country and a different league. Sometimes it takes time to settle in but I scored on my debut at home, which always helps with the fans. That got me off to a good start and I think it carried on. We had the best defensive record in the league. As a team, we just missed out on Europe through a qualifier against Copenhagen, our rivals, so that was disappointing. We drew too many games, which hampered our chances of trying to fight for the league but I'm happy I came here because I've seen what the club can become. If there are a few tweaks, there's no reason why we can't go and challenge for something this season.

Did you have any regrets after seeing your former club Coventry City win promotion to the Premier League?
It's great for them. [Frank] Lampard's done a great job. But I don't have any regrets because my role changed when he came in. I'm not jealous because I know that if I was there I maybe wouldn't have been playing as much as I would have wanted to. Selfishly, I would have felt like an outsider. Ultimately, I'm a footballer to play football. I'm not one of those who doesn't like playing. When I look back on my career, I'd rather look back on playing and developing than being in a side that's doing well but maybe I'm not contributing as much as I want to.

How did you find working with Frank Lampard? How would you describe him as a manager?
He's a legend within the game. That was the era that I grew up watching football, with him and [Steven] Gerrard. To work under someone like that is great. He's a good coach and has had big jobs already. I was only with him for six or seven months, so I didn't see the full extent of what he's capable of. He probably took a more laid-back approach. I wouldn't say he was a man-manager. He had his assistant and fitness coach around him, who would more do that side of it. He kept himself away from the squad.

You were part of the Coventry team that lost a thrilling FA Cup semi-final to Manchester United in 2024. What are your memories of that day?
It's almost a blur. You grow up wanting to play at Wembley, and in the FA Cup, so to do that against Manchester United was great, despite the outcome. I came on around the 60th minute and we were 3-0 down so there was nothing to lose. I won the penalty that Haji [Wright] scored to make it 3-3 and take it to extra-time. You saw the United fans leaving and the players collapsing. We felt there was a real chance to go on and win it. We got the fourth goal but it was given offside – a very tight decision. Then it went to penalties, where anything can happen, but it's one of the best games in my career to date. To play a part in that comeback was amazing.

Your first taste of professional football came in Major League Soccer. Did leaving Tottenham Hotspur at 18 to join Montreal feel like a risk?
Looking back, it was a massive step, but I was young and fearless. I didn't know what to expect. The manager [Thierry Henry] was a high-profile name so I knew there would be eyes on us. I thought it was a good stepping-stone for me. I wanted to go and play first-team football as soon as possible because you learn far more from playing in the men's game than an Under-23s side, which was the plan for me at Tottenham. I just backed myself. I think people like the status of "Oh, I'm at a big club", but ultimately, if you're not playing, you're not really there. You've got to go and try to carve out your own career, and that's what I did. ➤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That season with Montreal was disrupted by COVID. How did you cope with that?
It was difficult. I signed in February, during pre-season, I played two games with fans there and then COVID hit. There was a big break in the season and I was stuck in Montreal on my own. I don't think I saw my family for nine months. I just got on with it. You're literally just indoors on your own, so it was difficult, but I knew the reason I went there and I don't regret it at all. I learned a lot on the pitch but I probably learned just as much off it. It made me grow up quite quickly.

You even ended up living in a hotel with Thierry Henry during that period. How did that happen?
I'd just moved there so I was in a hotel in the city. They decided to shut the hotel down because there weren't a lot of people there. The manager [Henry] rang me and said: "I'm in a hotel. They've shut it just for me, so do you want to come and stay here? I'll be on one floor. You'll be on the other." It was quite a nice hotel, as you can probably imagine. I'd go down in the morning for a run and he'd be sat in reception. I'd end up sitting there for most of the day chatting to him because he was probably just as lonely as me. We only had each other in a way. I'd sit there picking his brains – who he's played with, who he's played against, what makes a good defender. To have that one-on-one time with him was a bit surreal.

> "I enjoyed playing for England and Scotland, but if Scotland came for me tomorrow I'd love to play for them"

You then had spells in Italy with Bologna and Como. Why have you been so willing to travel in search of opportunities?
Every country you go to, there's a different atmosphere within grounds, a different way

FA Cup semi-final...Binks challenges Manchester United's Marcus Rashford at Wembley in 2024

Montreal Impact...Binks' senior career began at the Major League Soccer side in Canada in 2020

Youth international...Binks won 20 caps for England from the Under-16s to the Under-19s between 2017 and 2019

of working within the training ground. It's only a short career so I want to try to get the most out of it. Obviously you need a bit of stability with that along the way. I've jumped from club to club but always because it's a better opportunity and a step up. I've been willing to go anywhere as long as it's the right move at the right time and I can see myself developing because, ultimately, I want to get to one of the top five leagues. I came here because I think that can help.

Who was the toughest striker you came up against in Serie A and why?
I was 19, 20 at the time and I played against some big clubs, like Milan at home, which was brilliant. We had nine men and they brought on every attacker they had. They had [Rafael] Leao on one wing, [Olivier] Giroud and Zlatan [Ibrahimovic] up front. To mark those two greats at that age was a bit of a fairy tale, but I'd say Dries Mertens was the best when we played Napoli. He's more of an attacking midfielder but he played No.9 that day. He was just so intelligent. He was picking up all sorts of positions. If you stayed, he'd drop deep. If you went with him, he'd spin in behind.

You were on loan at Como in 2022-23 and since then they've won promotion to Serie A and qualified for the Champions League. Has their rise surprised you?
I saw the ambition they had, because I signed the same week that Fabregas did. We have the same agent so I knew he was going there, which was a big draw for me. There were signs but the training ground was terrible at the time and the stadium infrastructure wasn't the best. The ambition was always there but I didn't see it happening as quickly as it has. They only got promoted two years ago. Cesc has gone in as manager and done so well. It's remarkable.

How did it feel to play alongside Fabregas? Could you see his qualities as a coach even then?
I grew up watching him so to then share a changing room with him was quite surreal. There were only four or five English-speaking players, so I was in that group with him. We'd go to lunch and sit together. Just hearing him talk about the players he's played with and against, you're mesmerised by it. He'd talk about Messi as though he was anyone – "Leo this" and "Leo that." For him, it's normal. He's one of his best friends.

You learn so much by being around him. He wasn't in his prime but you could still see the quality he had. He was doing his badges and he was really invested in becoming a manager. I always thought he was going to be a success but I didn't know he'd do it this quickly.

You represented both England and Scotland at youth level. Where do you think your international future lies?
It's definitely something that's on my mind. I had quite a good youth international career. I enjoyed playing for both, but if Scotland came for me tomorrow I'd love to play for them. You can see with the way their fans took America by storm [at the World Cup], the atmosphere they bring to games is infectious. I've been following them closely and I think there could be a good pathway there because it's an ageing side at the back. I just know I need to do well here and hopefully there are eyes on me.

What would you pick out as the highlight of your time at Brondby so far?
Probably the last game of the season away to Midtjylland. The first half summed the last six months of our season up. We were hanging in there, defending loads. We were 2-0 down at half-time and a few things were said. In the second half, we turned it around and ended up winning 3-2 in the last two minutes. I scored the winner, which was brilliant for me. It meant that we had an extra game against Copenhagen to try to qualify for Europe. It kept our season alive and I saw what that meant to a lot of people.

Interview by Sean Cole

JORDAN HADAWAY

"The club was about to fold – it was a very unattractive place"

Europe's youngest top-flight manager discusses the Welsh Premier League, rescuing Llandudno from going out of business, and his plans for the future

How would you describe the level of the Cymru Premier?
It's highly competitive. There aren't any easy games. It's relentless in terms of the level of fitness and intensity that you have to have every week. I think the step up was shown in our first game – we had three or four injuries off the back of it because of the levels of fitness that you need. I would compare it to probably the National League [the English fifth tier].

The New Saints are the league's only full-time club, but most are part-time. What's your day job?
I'm a PE teacher. It's tough. It's tough being a PE teacher and first-team manager in the Welsh Premier, and then I'm also the academy director as well for the club. So I'm doing three full-time jobs really. It's tough, but I always think while you're young, you should do as much as you can to get as much experience and exposure, so later in life you don't have to do so much.

Your season got off to a winning start, a 3-2 victory against Flint with a dramatic stoppage-time winner. Did you enjoy it?
In my time here, I think we've won nine or ten games 3-2, coming from behind, and with a lot of them winning in the last four or five minutes. So I think it shows the mentality that we've built. It is stressful. Before the game I would've taken a point against Flint, an established Welsh Premier League team with a bigger budget and bigger resources than us. But in the game I went for it, and I'd rather have lost 3-2 than drawn the game. And luckily, it went in our favour.

More Friday night fixtures is one of the changes that the Cymru Premier has introduced for this new season. How do you feel about that?
Friday night games are great because Everton, Liverpool, [Manchester] United, Wrexham, Cardiff, Swansea aren't all playing on a Friday night, so the crowds increase. However, I don't think that they should have done it nationally because, for example, we've got Trefelin down in Port Talbot on a Friday, and it's a five-hour trip – five hours there, five hours back, and lads have got to take half a day off work. We don't pay them anywhere near enough to do what I'm asking them to do, so it's tough. But the league made that decision, so we've all got to try to fit in and formulate to it. I probably would have done North v North and South v South on Fridays.

Can you give that feedback to the league? Do you feel like it'll be taken on board?
My diplomatic answer is, I hope that they listen to the people that are on the ground because they are living and breathing the problems and the solutions that maybe we could suggest.

What are your thoughts on VAR being introduced to the league this season?
Obviously, we all want the game to move forward, and we all want it to align with the top levels like the English Premier League. However, I don't think in Wales we have the infrastructure from a financial point of view, from a logistics point of view, from a refereeing point of view, to be able to run VAR to the best of its abilities. I think maybe we should have introduced it over time rather than straight in. I think it's good for the league. However, there are lots of problems still with it that we need to iron out because I don't think managers, players or even referees are comfortable with the system that's in play at the minute.

Where are you aiming to finish this season?
If we stay in the league this year, it's a better job than winning the [second tier] last year. If we can push on further than just staying fourth from bottom, then brilliant. But the minute we're safe, it's job done, and then anything after that's a bonus.

You were about 14 when you realised that you weren't going to make it as a player. Did you find that difficult or did you always want to be a coach?
No, I didn't find it difficult. I'm realistic. I knew I wanted to stay in football, and I didn't want to stay at the lowest level, so I had to either do refereeing or coaching, and I didn't fancy getting screamed at for 90 minutes! The most important thing was I wanted to stay involved.

My aim from five or six years ago was to be a Welsh Premier League manager by 28. I never ever thought I'd be it by 24. So it's all happened as a bit of a roller coaster, but now it's time to try to show I can compete at that level.

You were just 21 when you were hired by Llandudno. How did that come about?
The club was basically about to fold. Lots of things had gone on. We had a 4G pitch, which got condemned 18 months before my appointment. We were waiting on funding from the Welsh government, and everybody left. We were playing our games away from home, and it was a very unattractive place.

I was the Under-19s manager at the time. The chairman came to me and said: "Look, we're going to have the lowest budget in the league. You won't be able to bring in any senior players, and I literally just want you to make sure that the club stays. I'm not bothered where you finish in the league. Just make sure that the club's still existing." I managed to use relationships with lads that I'd worked with in the past, who I knew probably didn't care about the money. And because I'd been the Under-19s manager for a long time, I knew all the best young players. So I said to them: "Look, come and play at a very

good level and see how we get on."
We ended up finishing tenth out of 16 and got to a cup final that year. Then we finished fourth, last year we finished first, and then obviously into the Welsh Premier this year.

I knew that this club shouldn't just be happy to exist. It's a huge club which was in the Europa League [qualifiers] ten years ago. It's something I felt strongly about. So I think it was important that we tried to push the club forward.

And now, at just 24 years old, you are Europe's youngest top-flight manager. What does that mean to you?
I'm proud of it, but I know that I'm not there just because of me. I'm there because of everybody around me, players and staff. So I'm proud of it. However, I wouldn't ever be scared of anybody that I'm going up against.

How do you win over senior players?
I'm honest. I'm open. I'm fair. Players that I bring in at the start probably think: "Bloody hell. I don't know how this is going to go!" But then, two weeks in, they say: "He knows what he's doing." That's something that I've always won respect over because I'll never go behind anybody's back. I'll have the difficult conversations, and I also believe that I know what I'm doing.

What's your long-term ambition?
To get Llandudno into Europe – if we could do that on the budget that we've got. I don't want to leave Llandudno. I love the club, I love the place, I love the people I work with, but I'm not naive. I know that things have to come to an end at some point. But that would be my kind of long-term ambition: to try to sustain myself as a Welsh Premier League manager, because I don't really have any ambition for leaving my teaching jobs and moving to full-time football.

Interview by Jamie Evans

Glenn Moore

Putellas ready to light up WSL

London City Lionesses' signing of the legendary Spain international will shake up the Women's Super League in 2026-27

That two-time Ballon d'Or winner Alexia Putellas should opt to move to England's WSL upon deciding she needed a new challenge was not that surprising; after all, it is Europe's most competitive league with matches increasingly taking place in the citadels of the men's game in front of massive five-figure crowds. Her destination, however, was a shock.

But then again, maybe it should not have been. London City Lionesses may play at Hayes Lane, the home of lower league men's club Bromley, in front of an average crowd of 3,294, but since Michele Kang took over in December 2023 they have become the most ambitious club in women's football.

LCL broke the world transfer record in signing France midfielder Grace Geyoro from PSG for £1.4 million last season, one of 16 new signings ahead of their first top-flight campaign. Putellas is even more of a statement signing, proof that last season's sixth place, though high for a newly-promoted club, is not enough.

Kang is in a hurry. Spain defender Mapi Leon has also arrived from Barcelona, goalkeeper Mary Earps from PSG, France striker Kadidiatou Diani from Kang's other European club, OL Lyonnes, and German forward Nicole Anyomi from Eintracht Frankfurt. They join the likes of Saki Kumagai (Japan), Kosovare Asllani (Sweden) and Danielle van de Donk (Netherlands) at the club. But it is Putellas who is the focus of attention.

Despite being a free agent, she won't have come cheap. But the 32-year-old says wages were not the decisive factor.

"A lot of people are saying it's about money, but it is not," she told *BBC Sport*. "I needed something completely different to what I lived in Barcelona. There is no men's club behind the women's team, it is a female owner at the club and I am in the most competitive league – that means I can push myself to my limits."

That it certainly is. Compared with the weekly walkovers she enjoyed with Barca, few league matches will be easy, even with a trio of newly-promoted clubs in an expanded 14-team division. A top-three finish and a Champions League place is by no means certain.

Any other summer, the transfer activity around Arsenal would have grabbed the headlines. England's Georgia Stanway and Spain's Ona Batlle are the star names but they have also added Germany forward Selina Cerci (Hoffenheim), Spain keeper Misa Rodrigues (Real Madrid) and Geraldine Reuteler, who showed her potential with Switzerland at Euro 2025.

That investment has eased the pain for Arsenal fans of two club legends departing to rivals: Beth Mead joining Manchester City after nine seasons at the Gunners, and Katie McCabe making a shock switch to Chelsea after 11.

That was one of several signings made by Sonia Bompastor as she approaches her third season after a campaign in which Chelsea only won the League Cup, their worst return since 2019.

Since Michele Kang took over London City Lionesses, they have become the most ambitious club in women's football

Melvine Malard was lured from Manchester United and Italy's Giulia Dragoni from Barcelona. Japan's Manaka Matsukubo arrived from North Carolina Courage while going the other way across the Atlantic were stalwarts Sam Kerr and Guro Reiten (both Gotham FC).

With Millie Bright retiring, Niamh Charles joining Manchester City and Johanna Rytting Kaneryd going to Lyonnes, the squad finally feels like Bompastor's rather than Emma Hayes'.

Arsenal legend... England's Beth Mead has joined Manchester City after nine years in North London

Defending champions City have largely stuck with a settled winning squad – besides signing Mead and Charles their main deal was fighting off Chelsea to retain Khadija Shaw.

Manchester United were also quiet in the market as the season loomed, though in their case it seemed more to do with a lack of investment than confidence in a squad that came fourth, manager Marc Skinner's exit "by mutual consent" a month before the season began adding to the sense of drift.

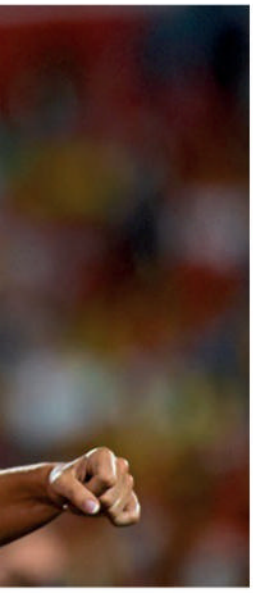
For his successor, the Spaniard Eva Olid – who led Hearts to the Scottish title last season – even fourth could be difficult this year, as LCL are not the only mid-table side investing heavily; Tottenham Hotspur and West Ham United have both noticeably upgraded.

Spurs broke their transfer record to sign Lyonnes' France international Alice Sombath, also picking up Dutch duo Victoria Pelova (Arsenal) and Caitlin Dijkstra (Wolfsburg) plus two forwards, Scot Kirsty Hanson (Aston Villa) and German Shekiera Martinez (West Ham).

For their part, the Hammers have added Spain's Laia Codina (Arsenal) and Swiss Nadine Riesen (Frankfurt), forward Ebony Salmon (Aston Villa) and made permanent the loans of Estelle Cascarino (Juventus) and Katie Zelem (LCL).

Among other eye-catching deals, Crystal Palace captured former Chelsea and Spurs striker Beth England, Brighton brought ex-Arsenal midfielder Lia Walti back to the WSL from Juventus, and Liverpool acquired England keeper Khiara Keating (Manchester City) and German forward Vivien Endemann (Wolfsburg).

In Germany the main transfer splash has been made by a side in the third tier,



High-profile signing... Spain's Alexia Putellas has joined London City Lionesses

which becomes less surprising with the knowledge that that team is Borussia Dortmund. Arguably the second-biggest club in the country in the men's game, Dortmund decided upon belatedly launching their women's section in 2021-22 that they would progress organically through the leagues.

Four promotions later they reached the Regionalliga West but missed out on a fifth promotion last season despite a +101 goal difference. They are taking no chances this time, recruiting Germany's Alexandra Popp and Austria's Manuela Zinsberger, last at Wolfsburg and Arsenal respectively, and both possessing more than 100 international caps. In addition, Ralf Kellerman, the architect behind much of Wolfsburg's past success, has been hired as sporting director.

While Dortmund climb the leagues, Wolfsburg themselves are trying to close the growing gap to Bayern Munich and hold off Eintracht Frankfurt. Losing Germany striker Endemann and Dijkstra to the WSL and Lineth Beerensteyn to Real Madrid won't help.

Aside from Stanway's exit, Bayern have largely retained the squad that finished 16 points clear last season claiming their fourth successive league title, but Frankfurt have lost a number of players including Anyomi, Swiss pair Reuteler and Reisen, Germany's Elisa Sens (Real Madrid) and Japan forward Remina Chiba (Juventus).

If Bayern start favourites in Germany, so too do Lyonnes in France. Despite the introduction of end-of-season play-offs, they took their 19th title in 20 seasons in emphatic style. After thrashing Nantes 8-0 in the semi-final, Ada Hegerberg scoring a hat-trick, they beat Paris FC 5-0 in the final. Melchie Dumornay hit a hat-trick and Tabitha Chawinga a brace.

While Diani has crossed the Channel along with Sombath, OL have recruited Spain's Salma Paralluelo (Barcelona) and Scotland's Caroline Weir (Real Madrid) but third signing Sweden's Rytting Kaneryd suffered an ACL injury pre-season.

In Spain, Barcelona should again reign supreme, despite Real Madrid strengthening and the cost-cutting that has contributed to the exits of Putellas, Leon, Batlle and Paralluelo. Defending their European crown, even after prising Brazil forward Kerolin from Manchester City for €1.4m, may be another matter.

In Italy, Roma and Juventus have shared the last nine titles, with Roma's three all coming in the last four years. Their title defence will be hampered by the loss of last season's Serie A top scorer Tessa Wullaert, the Belgian joining newly-promoted Como 1907, not to be confused with Como, the independent women's club owned since 2024 by multi-club ownership group Mercury/13.

Round-up

Euro Under-19s...Spain players celebrate with the trophy in Sarajevo, Bosnia

SPAIN WIN UNDER-19 EUROS

Yet another item of silverware was added to the trophy cabinet at the Spanish FA's headquarters, with the women's Under-19 team claiming the European Championship to go alongside the men's World Cup and the men's Under-19 Euros. Real Madrid's Irune Dorado scored the only goal against Germany in the final, which took place in Sarajevo, Bosnia.

The Spanish have now claimed this title five years in a row, and won seven of the last eight editions, demonstrating their conveyor belt of talent.

KIWIS MAKE IT A TREBLE

Auckland United won the Oceania Champions League, defeating Papua New Guinea's Hekari in the final for the third year in succession, this time 3-1. The tournament was hosted by the Solomon Islands. Auckland will now face North Korea's Naegohyang in the first round of the FIFA Women's Champions Cup.

CHAWINGA SISTERS LIGHT UP WAFCON

The story of the Women's Africa Cup of Nations was Malawi. With the Chawinga sisters, Temwa, of Kansas City Current, and Tabitha of OL Lyonnes, to the fore they began the tournament creating an almighty shock in beating ten-time champions Nigeria and went on to book the nation's debut appearance at a World Cup finals.

They finished top of their group then beat Ghana 2-1 in the quarters-finals to secure a place at Brazil 2027.

The second biggest story was Nigeria. They recovered to escape the group

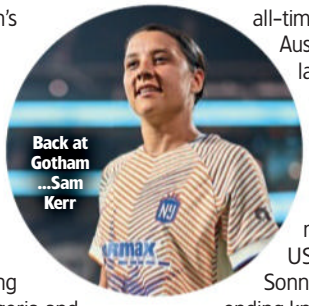
Prolific... Malawi goal machine Temwa Chawinga

but their title defence was ended by Cameroon in the last eight. After a subsequent loss to South Africa (who were defeated 2-1 by Morocco in the quarters) in the play-ins, Nigeria's 100 per cent World Cup attendance record is over. South Africa and Ghana head into the inter-confederation play-offs.

Also securing an automatic place in Brazil alongside Cameroon, Malawi and Morocco were Algeria, who defeated Ivory Coast 2-1 in the quarter-finals.

KERR BACK IN SCORING FORM

Sam Kerr wasted little time in making her mark on her return to the NWSL, scoring on her first game in her second stint with Gotham with a goal in a 2-2 draw at Portland Thorns, extending the record she still holds as the league's all-time record goalscorer. The Australian ended her trophy-laden spell Chelsea at the end of last season, and returned to the NWSL after a seven-year absence.



Back at Gotham ...Sam Kerr

Celebrations were muted due to Gotham's USWNT defender Emily Sonnett suffering a season-ending knee injury during the match that could have repercussions for next year World Cup finals.

Kerr, now 32, played for Sky Blue, as Gotham were then known, from 2015 to 2017, then had two seasons in Chicago at Red Stars before moving across the Atlantic.

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South America

TIM VICKERY

5 Things...

...from South America

1 CONMEBOL EYES WORLD CUP EXPANSION

In the normal way of things, South America has no great interest in an expansion of the World Cup to 64 teams. With 48 nations, the continent already qualifies six of ten countries, with a seventh going into the inter-confederation play-offs. Having any more slots would effectively render the qualification campaign meaningless.

But 2030 is a different matter. One hundred years on from Uruguay 1930, South America had hoped to celebrate the World Cup centenary by hosting the tournament. It was fobbed off with a bizarre arrangement whereby Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay have been awarded one game each before the action switches to Spain, Portugal and Morocco. The continent has been pushing for an enlargement to 64 – on a one-off basis – in the hope of getting more games and thus making stadium and infrastructure upgrades more worthwhile. It will be interesting to see how this issue is resolved over the next few months.

2 NO MORE NEYMAR FOR *SELECAO*

A little more than three weeks after the desperately disappointing World Cup last-16 elimination at the hands of Norway, national team coach Carlo Ancelotti returned to Brazil to face the music and start to plan for the future.

His task was surely eased by Neymar's announcement the previous day that he was retiring from international football. All of the noise around the big star had surely harmed Brazil's World Cup campaign, and, blaming himself rather than the player, Ancelotti confessed that the structure of his team fell apart and Brazil lost control of the game at the point when Neymar was introduced.

The coach also declared that right-back Danilo and midfielder Casemiro will not be seen again and, a former central midfielder himself, Ancelotti stressed that the priority is to develop a new generation of players in this position.

Re-building... Brazil head coach Carlo Ancelotti

3 CONTINENTAL COMPETITION BACK UNDERWAY

Just over 48 hours after the final whistle blew in the World Cup final, continental club football was back in action in South America, with names like Leandro Paredes and Neymar starring in the play-off round of

Bouncing back... Neymar was in Copa Sudamericana action for Santos within weeks of Brazil's World Cup exit

Copa Sudamericana...Boca Juniors saw off O'Higgins of Chile on penalties to progress to the last 16

the Copa Sudamericana, the continent's second-string club competition.

With the eight group winners already through to August's last 16, the play-offs were between the Sudamericana group runners-up and the teams that finished third in their group in the Libertadores.

Amid three triumphs for Brazilian teams, the standout result was the elimination of Gremio by Bolivar of Bolivia, who held a precarious 3-2 lead from their home leg at the extreme altitude of La Paz and then caused a shock by winning 1-0 in Porto Alegre.

Their victory keeps Bolivia alive in international club competition – but it is already all over for Venezuela, after Universidad Central and Caracas fell to disappointingly timid defeats.

4 COPA SUDAMERICANA *SUPERCLASICO* STILL ON

Boca Juniors came through after winning a penalty shootout against O'Higgins of Chile – and this makes the Sudamericana a far more glamorous competition than in recent years.

The main appeal of the Sudamericana knockout rounds is usually that a wider range of nations are involved than in the Libertadores. This is true again this year, with eight nations supplying representatives as opposed to six in the Libertadores. But the 2026 Sudamericana has another claim to attention: an appeal to tradition. True, the Libertadores contains the likes of Flamengo and Palmeiras, the Brazilian pair who have dominated the continent's football for a decade. But while it has seven former champions in its last 16, the Sudamericana has eight – with famous names such as Sao Paulo and Santos, plus the huge attraction of both Boca Juniors and River Plate.

Perhaps unfortunately, the Argentinian arch-rivals cannot meet in the final – in Barranquilla, Colombia on November 21. But there is a chance of an epic two-legged *Superclasico* semi-final in October.

5 PENAROL WIN URUGUAYAN INTERMEDIO TITLE

Normal service resumed in Uruguay, with Penarol winning the Intermedio tournament, the second of three played per year by the 16 clubs.

It was proving a tough year for the normally dominant big two of Penarol and Nacional, out of internacional club action early and left behind in the Apertura, the first championship.

In the Intermedio, held between May and early August, the teams are divided in two, with the group winners meeting in a final. Penarol coasted through, while tiny but traditional Wanderers won a famous victory over Nacional on the way to topping their group.

But Wanderers were swiftly dealt with in the final, beaten 5-1 by a Penarol side whose switch to a three centre-back formation proved an inspired move by coach Diego Aguirre.

Uruguayan Intermedio winners...Penarol players lift the trophy for the second successive season

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

5 Things...

...from Asian football

Back in action... supporters of reigning Indian Super League champions East Bengal

1 INDIAN SUPER LEAGUE READY TO RETURN

After the trials and tribulations of last season, which due to contractual issues kicked off late and lasted just 13 games, there is a full Indian Super League (ISL) campaign due to start in September. And there's more. The FA is still in charge of the governance and administration but, for the first time, the clubs have control of the commercial side of things.

Finally there was optimism that while the journey ahead is long, the league is finally facing in the right direction.

But then, on July 31 Jamshedpur FC, champions back in 2022, informed the federation that it would not be taking part as owners Tata Steel felt the business model was not financially viable. It was a big surprise and a bigger blow. To lose a well-supported successful club is bad enough but to lose a major corporation makes it doubly painful, especially as it came after a World Cup that had been closely followed in India and there were hopes that the fever would cross into the domestic game.

On the pitch, Kolkata giants East Bengal are the defending champions after finishing just ahead of city rivals Mohun Bagan and will be aiming to keep hold of their crown. Promoted Diamond Harbour, of West Bengal, are preparing for a first season in the top tier after promotion. Despite the setback of Jamshedpur's withdrawal, the hype created during the World Cup means there may never be a better time for an ISL reboot.

Defending J.League champions...Kashima Antlers won the Japanese top-flight title in 2025

2 NEW-LOOK J.LEAGUE KICKS OFF

Japan were left disappointed in the World Cup, failing to get past the first knockout-round game for a frustrating fifth time. There have been measures put in place to help improve that – even if the calendar change for the J.League is an indirect one.

In August, the 2026-27 season kicked off but this is the first after a rescheduling that has seen the league move from its old March-December format to August-May. This is to align Japanese domestic football with the best in the world, making it easier and cheaper to sign better players and also sell homegrown talent.

Passion for the game...football fans in Dhaka, Bangladesh watch the 2026 World Cup final

There are doubters, not least those in the north who face some serious winters – even if there aren't any in the top tier for this debut campaign – but it is seen as a necessary step forward. Those in South Korea and China are watching but, given that some areas of those countries face even harsher winters, it may not be possible for them to follow.

3 BANGLADESH LOOKING TO SOUTH ASIAN GLORY

South Asia made headlines during the summer as fans showed their passion in supporting the likes of Argentina, Brazil, France, Spain and others at the World Cup, but November's South Asian Football Federation (SAFF) Championship is approaching quickly.

Seven teams from the region will take part in the 15th edition: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Bhutan and Sri Lanka as well as Nepal – assuming that the country's federation has had its ban lifted by FIFA for political interference (Kathmandu may have some pertinent questions for the governing body after events at the World Cup).

Bangladesh will host for the first time in eight years and, given some of the strides the national team has made – though European-based players such as Hamza Choudhury of Leicester City are unlikely to be available – they will be looking to lift a first trophy since 2003.

India are defending champions and nine-time record winners, while Pakistan will be grateful for some rare competitive action. With World Cup qualification in Asia starting next year, it is a chance to start the new cycle on a high.

4 JORDAN STICK WITH MOROCCAN MANAGEMENT

Jordan reached the final of the 2023 Asian Cup with one Moroccan coach, Hussein Ammouta, and then qualified for a first-ever World Cup under another, Jamal Sellami. He left after those three defeats in North America with the country still wondering whether he jumped or was pushed.

Either way, with the 2027 Asian Cup starting in January, a new coach is in place – and he also hails from the North African country. Ezzaki Badou won 78 caps in goal for Morocco and also represented Real Mallorca.

Now 67, he has a long list of clubs and national teams on his CV, most recently Sudan and Niger, including a spell in charge of the Atlas Lions from 2014 to 2016. Expectations in Jordan are now high and the veteran boss has a big job on his hands and big shoes to fill.

5 AMBITIOUS KYRGYZSTAN MOVING FORWARD

The Central Asian nation has been making strides. The 2027 Asian Cup will be a third appearance in succession at the continental stage. This follows Kyrgyzstan making the final round of World Cup qualification for the first time in their history and being among the last 18 nations in contention for a place at the 2026 tournament.

The government, which hopes to host the Asian Cup along with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in the next decade, is on board. The new 51,000-capacity Bishkek Arena is nearing completion and will be the biggest in Central Asia, and there is private investment in clubs too. Uzbekistan have set the standard for the region in recent years but now others are looking to step up.

On the rise ...Alimardon Shukurov of Kyrgyzstan

Saudi Arabia

JOHN DUERDEN

Big Ange tasked with defending league title

Ange Postecoglou's appointment by defending champions Al Nassr is the most notable arrival in the 2026-27 Saudi Pro League

The Saudi Pro League returned in August after an up-and-down close season. It ended last campaign with Al Nassr celebrating a first title since 2018-19. Cristiano Ronaldo lifting the trophy was exactly what club bosses wanted when they signed the megastar back in December 2022 and it didn't go down badly with the league either.

Al Nassr have been busy since, though not as busy as they may have expected. When Ange Postecoglou left Nottingham Forest in October, not many would have predicted that Riyadh would have been his next port of call. It remains to be seen how the charismatic Australian coach, with his famous playing style and philosophy, manages at a club where it is all about results and second seasons are not always forthcoming. Even a winless streak of three games would see the pressure ramp up.

Al Nassr's new coach...Ange Postecoglou

Star-studded... Al Nassr won last season's SPL title

There may be slightly less pressure this season as Al Nassr have been struggling with financial issues. At the end of July, Saudi media was reporting that the club had debts of around £160 million, limiting the club's activity in the transfer market. There are also rumours that the club's owners, the Public Investment Fund (PIF), could be ready to offload the Yellows, as it did earlier this year with Al Hilal in April.

Still, with Ronaldo within touching distance of 1,000 career goals – and he will make it if he matches last season's tally of 28 – there will be plenty to talk about. With Sadio Mane, Joao Felix and numerous Saudi internationals, even without many new players, Postecoglou will be expected to deliver, especially in the Asian Champions League Elite, a prize never won by the yellow half of Riyadh.

Over in the blue half of the city, Al Hilal have a record four continental crowns but were prevented from winning domestic title number 20 by Al Nassr. Head coach Simone Inzaghi still hasn't truly won the fans over despite going through the 34-game season unbeaten last time around and finishing just two points off the top.

Al Hilal have already made waves in the transfer market, paying a reported £60 million to snap up Netherlands international Crysencio Summerville from West Ham United to add strength to the wings after the departure of Malcom and injury to captain Salem Al Dawsari. Bayern Munich's Luis Diaz was a missed target but ambition is still there. Al Hilal tend to bounce back after disappointment and anything less than the title would be seen as failure.

And what of Al Ahli? Last season ended with Asian Champions League Elite glory for the second successive campaign and third place in the SPL, just five points off top spot. After the double continental success, the plan was to try to win just a second domestic crown since 1984. Riyad Mahrez left after three successful seasons and then, just two weeks before the season started, head coach Matthias Jaissle departed for Newcastle United. Not many managers last three years in Saudi Arabia and the young German has left big shoes to fill. At least the Al Ahli fans, who are some of Asia's most passionate, still have England striker Ivan Toney, who netted 32 league goals last season, while new signing Francisco Trincao is an exciting addition.

> **With Cristiano Ronaldo, Sadio Mane, Joao Felix and numerous Saudi internationals, even without many new players, Ange Postecoglou will be expected to deliver**

Jeddah rivals Al Ittihad had a season to forget in 2025-26. Starting out as defending champions, coach Laurent Blanc lasted just a few weeks before being replaced by Sergio Conceicao. The poor results continued, both at home and in Asia, and the mid-season departure of Karim Benzema to Al Hilal didn't go down well. In the end, the Tigers finished a disappointing fifth, a full 31 points behind the champions and, even more damning, a full 22 behind Al Qadsiah in fourth.

Under Brendan Rodgers, Qadsiah, the team from the east (and the only one in the top five not from Jeddah or Riyadh), had a great season, and were in the title race right until the end. Fourth was a solid showing and this time the Aramco-backed club will be looking to go close to a first title but will also have to deal with a first AFC Champions League campaign. The team has plenty of firepower. Julian Quinones showed what he could do at the World Cup for Mexico, although followers of the SPL already knew that as the forward finished top of the scoring charts last campaign with 33 goals. Italy's Mateo Retegui, one of the big signings last summer, managed 16.

Neom SC enjoyed their first season in the top flight, despite not yet being able to play in the city that is still being built. Eighth was solid enough but former Paris Saint-Germain boss Christophe Galtier will be looking for a top-six finish. That will be enough for the ambitious club for now, as cracking the top five will be far from easy.

Summer signing... Crysencio Sumerville has joined Al Hilal from West Ham

Northern Cyprus

STEVE MENARY

CONIFA European Football Cup ...Northern Cyprus players line up ahead of their clash with Rouet Provence in June

Overcoming isolation

After eight years without playing, one of Europe's most reclusive representative teams has returned to action

Troops from Turkey invaded the top third of Cyprus in 1974 on the pretext of protecting the island's Turkish minority. Nine years later, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus declared independence, which has been ignored by everywhere outside of Turkey. Nevertheless, a strong domestic football scene has managed to develop.

The Super Lig is comprised of 16 clubs. Among them is Cetinkaya, who won the Cypriot league in 1950-51 before domestic unrest prompted Turkish clubs to split away in 1955 and form the Cyprus Turkish Football Association (KTFF).

Big games can attract crowds of up to 7,000. Players are all part-time but can earn up to €5,000 a month at clubs like 2025-26 champions Genclik Gucu, who play on the Turkish side of the divided capital Nicosia, as well as Dogan Turk Birligi from Kyrenia and 2024-25 champions Magusa Turk Gucu from Famagusta.

Another 16 clubs play in the second-tier 1.Lig, with amateur leagues beneath that. With most villages having a team, the KTFF claims about 80 member clubs but attempts to play representative football have proved more difficult due to international isolation.

"Football is very big in Cyprus and culturally it brings people together," says Hasan Cerkez, the KTFF's external affairs manager, who is among a large contingent from Northern Cyprus at the Confederation of International Football Associations (CONIFA).

He adds: "We want to go out of the country. We have the Super Lig and that's it. CONIFA is a great opportunity, but we want to go to a higher standard. We want to go to a recognised confederation."

That will prove difficult as UEFA's criteria is membership of the United Nations, which will not happen given the frozen nature of the situation in Cyprus that has proved impossible to bridge.

Northern Cyprus joined the alternative football scene two decades ago and spent $100,000 hosting and winning their own tournament for non-FIFA members, the ELF Cup, in 2006. They joined CONIFA in 2013 and finished runners-up at the CONIFA European Football Cup in 2017 and CONIFA's World Football Cup a year later, only to disappear, partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We were going to host the 2023 CONIFA Euros but then the earthquake hit," explains Cerkez of the natural disaster that year that killed 24 children from Famagusta's Maarif College who had travelled to Adiyaman to play in a high school volleyball tournament. "We were not ready emotionally and a lot of funding went to different areas, particularly those affected by the earthquake."

Players from Northern Cyprus have played in the Republic of Cyprus since the border opened in 2003. Clubs with a more left-wing support base have proved more receptive and Coskun Ulusoy was an early trailblazer at Nea Salamina. More recently, Tahsin Ozler was with Omonia Nicosia but signed for Turkish second-tier side Ankara Keciorengucu in 2025.

> "CONIFA is a great opportunity, but we want to go to a higher standard. We want to go to a recognised confederation"
>
> Hasan Cerkez, Cyprus Turkish Football Association

London born... Northern Cyprus star Erhun Oztumer

Ozler was in the Northern Cyprus team that strolled to the 2026 CONIFA European Football Cup title in Insubria in northern Italy, demolishing hosts Padania 6-1 with four goals from Erhun Oztumer, who was born in London and played for Walsall, Peterborough United, Charlton Athletic and Bolton Wanderers, but is now in Northern Cyprus with Magusa Turk Gucu.

After eight years on the sidelines, the title represented a major success. but for all the KTFF's ambitions, CONIFA is likely to be the team's only outlet for the foreseeable future.

Tales from the 211

Some of the more unusual and interesting records, stats and facts ahead of the 2026-27 campaign

Portuguese underdogs... Torreense

CONTINENTAL OUTSIDERS

Located in Torres Vedras – a city of under 100,000 inhabitants approximately 50km north of the capital Lisbon – second-tier Torreense pulled off a seismic upset by becoming the first lower-league side to ever win the Portuguese Cup last season. The 38-year-old Cape Verde full-back Stopira scored the winning goal in extra-time in the final against Sporting as the minnows won the first major trophy in their 109-year history.

That silverware means Torreense, who narrowly missed out on a place in the Primeira Liga when they lost to Casa Pia in the promotion/relegation play-off days later, are guaranteed a spot in the league phase of the Europa League. They will be the only lower-league club involved across the three European club competitions this season.

With their 2,500-capacity stadium falling some way short of meeting UEFA criteria, the club initially licensed the Estadio do Algarve – more than 300km away – as their home venue before switching to the much-closer Estadio Dr Magalhaes Pessoa in Leiria in July.

SWISS GUESTS

The new Swiss Super League season is set to feature 11 clubs from across the country – and one from neighbouring Liechtenstein. FC Vaduz, who are based in the micro-state's tiny capital and are the dominant force in the local cup with a world-record 52 domestic cup titles, just about held off challengers Aarau to win the Challenge League in 2025-26 and secure a place in Switzerland's top flight for the first time in six years.

Promoted Thun won the league last term, but it can already be said with certainty that this season's newcomers will not replicate that feat. One of the conditions of their participation as a guest club is that they can neither be crowned Swiss champions, nor represent the country in continental competition.

TOTAL DOMINANCE

Bulgarians Ludogorets were Europe's most dominant club until last season, when they failed to win the league title for the first time since 2010-11 and saw their 14-year run – a joint European record – come to an end. The continental record for the longest ongoing title-winning streak now passes on to Red Star Belgrade, who have won every single edition of Serbia's Superliga since crosstown rivals Partizan became champions in 2016-17, and are the heavy favourites to make it a decade on the throne this term.

Globally, however, the longest run belongs to Johor Darul Ta'zim, who are owned by Crown Prince of Johor Tunku Ismail Idris. The Southern Tigers have won all 12 editions of the Malaysian Super League since 2014 and equalled an all-time world record for the most consecutive top-flight league games unbeaten when they thrashed Kelantan The Real Warriors 14-1 at the end of last season. That final-day victory put them level on 108 games with Ivorian side ASEC Mimosas, who originally set the record between 1989 and 1994.

BIGGEST TOURNAMENT

With more than 7,000 competing teams, the Coupe de France is the biggest national cup tournament in world football. It dwarfs the English FA Cup, with almost ten times as many participants, and is open to almost every affiliated club in France – from Ligue 1 all the way down to district-level amateur teams and even representatives from overseas territories.

That overseas involvement also makes it a truly global competition; Asia is the only continent without representation. The participating territories range from St Pierre & Miquelon, an archipelago off the coast of Canada which has only three football teams, to the likes of Tahiti and New Caledonia, which are OFC members in their own right.

The journey between the latter's capital Noumea and mainland France is around 17,000km as the crow flies, meaning the territory's representative annually faces the longest away journey to a game in world football.

SMALLEST LEAGUE

Moldova – whose Superliga contains only eight clubs including Sheriff Tiraspol from the breakaway republic of Transnistria – has the smallest league in UEFA. While Liechtenstein is technically home to just seven teams, it does not have its own league structure and so Moldova takes the crown for the smallest national championship.

This ultra-compactness means the division is only half the size of the championship in San Marino, a micro-state of only 35,000 people where 16 clubs compete, and has even fewer teams than Gibraltar, a British overseas territory of only 6.8km squared with 12 participants.

Excluding the 12 summer leagues, it was the first top-flight division in UEFA to start their 2026-27 season – the opening round of fixtures took place on June 27, when the World Cup group stages were still underway in North America – and has a rather perplexing format whereby the bottom two clubs are demoted mid-season and compete with second-tier teams for the right to return to the top flight at the end of the campaign.

The Sweeper

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PREMIER LEAGUE FIXTURES 2026-27

AUGUST 21
Arsenal v Coventry City

AUGUST 22
Hull City v Manchester United
Everton v Crystal Palace
Ipswich Town v Sunderland
Nottingham Forest v Leeds United
Brentford v Tottenham Hotspur

AUGUST 23
Brighton v Aston Villa
Manchester City v Bournemouth
Newcastle United v Liverpool

AUGUST 24
Fulham v Chelsea

AUGUST 28
Crystal Palace v Manchester City

AUGUST 29
Liverpool v Nottingham Forest
Bournemouth v Everton
Coventry City v Hull City
Tottenham Hotspur v Newcastle United

AUGUST 30
Chelsea v Brighton
Leeds United v Brentford
Sunderland v Fulham
Manchester United v Ipswich Town

AUGUST 31
Aston Villa v Arsenal

SEPTEMBER 4
Ipswich Town v Liverpool

SEPTEMBER 5
Newcastle United v Bournemouth
Brentford v Sunderland
Brighton v Leeds United
Fulham v Crystal Palace
Manchester City v Coventry City
Nottingham Forest v Tottenham Hotspur
Hull City v Aston Villa

SEPTEMBER 6
Everton v Manchester United
Arsenal v Chelsea

SEPTEMBER 12
Aston Villa v Nottingham Forest
Bournemouth v Brentford
Chelsea v Hull City
Crystal Palace v Ipswich Town
Liverpool v Fulham
Tottenham Hotspur v Everton
Sunderland v Arsenal

SEPTEMBER 13
Coventry City v Brighton
Manchester United v Manchester City

SEPTEMBER 14
Leeds United v Newcastle United

SEPTEMBER 18
Brentford v Chelsea

SEPTEMBER 19
Tottenham Hotspur v Aston Villa
Brighton v Arsenal
Everton v Ipswich Town
Leeds United v Crystal Palace
Manchester City v Sunderland
Newcastle United v Hull City
Nottingham Forest v Coventry City

SEPTEMBER 20
Bournemouth v Liverpool
Fulham v Manchester United

OCTOBER 10
Arsenal v Leeds United
Aston Villa v Brentford
Chelsea v Bournemouth
Coventry City v Newcastle United
Crystal Palace v Nottingham Forest
Hull City v Everton
Ipswich Town v Fulham
Liverpool v Manchester City
Manchester United v Tottenham Hotspur
Sunderland v Brighton

OCTOBER 17
Bournemouth v Sunderland
Brentford v Liverpool
Brighton v Crystal Palace
Everton v Chelsea
Fulham v Hull City
Leeds United v Manchester United
Manchester City v Ipswich Town
Newcastle United v Aston Villa
Nottingham Forest v Arsenal
Tottenham Hotspur v Coventry City

OCTOBER 24
Arsenal v Everton
Aston Villa v Manchester City
Chelsea v Tottenham Hotspur
Coventry City v Fulham
Crystal Palace v Newcastle United
Hull City v Brentford
Ipswich Town v Nottingham Forest
Liverpool v Brighton
Manchester United v Bournemouth
Sunderland v Leeds United

OCTOBER 31
Aston Villa v Fulham
Bournemouth v Leeds United
Brentford v Nottingham Forest
Chelsea v Manchester United
Coventry City v Sunderland
Hull City v Ipswich Town
Liverpool v Arsenal
Manchester City v Brighton
Newcastle United v Everton
Tottenham Hotspur v Crystal Palace

Manchester derby ...City v United

NOVEMBER 7
Arsenal v Hull City
Brighton v Brentford
Crystal Palace v Liverpool
Everton v Coventry City
Fulham v Newcastle United
Ipswich Town v Bournemouth
Leeds United v Tottenham Hotspur
Manchester United v Aston Villa
Nottingham Forest v Manchester City
Sunderland v Chelsea

NOVEMBER 21
Aston Villa v Sunderland
Bournemouth v Nottingham Forest
Brentford v Everton
Chelsea v Leeds United
Coventry City v Crystal Palace
Hull City v Brighton
Liverpool v Manchester United
Manchester City v Fulham
Newcastle United v Arsenal
Tottenham Hotspur v Ipswich Town

NOVEMBER 28
Arsenal v Manchester City
Brighton v Newcastle United
Crystal Palace v Hull City
Everton v Liverpool
Fulham v Bournemouth
Ipswich Town v Aston Villa
Leeds United v Coventry City
Manchester United v Brentford
Nottingham Forest v Chelsea
Sunderland v Tottenham Hotspur

DECEMBER 2
Aston Villa v Everton
Bournemouth v Brighton
Brentford v Arsenal
Chelsea v Crystal Palace
Coventry City v Ipswich Town
Hull City v Nottingham Forest
Liverpool v Sunderland
Manchester City v Leeds United
Newcastle United v Manchester United
Tottenham Hotspur v Fulham

DECEMBER 5
Aston Villa v Crystal Palace
Bournemouth v Hull City
Brentford v Manchester City
Chelsea v Liverpool
Everton v Fulham
Leeds United v Ipswich Town
Manchester United v Coventry City
Newcastle United v Sunderland
Nottingham Forest v Brighton
Tottenham Hotspur v Arsenal

DECEMBER 12
Arsenal v Bournemouth
Brighton v Everton
Coventry City v Aston Villa
Crystal Palace v Manchester United
Fulham v Brentford
Hull City v Tottenham Hotspur
Ipswich Town v Newcastle United
Liverpool v Leeds United
Manchester City v Chelsea
Sunderland v Nottingham Forest

DECEMBER 19
Arsenal v Manchester United
Bournemouth v Coventry City
Brentford v Newcastle United
Brighton v Ipswich Town
Chelsea v Aston Villa
Leeds United v Fulham
Liverpool v Tottenham Hotspur
Manchester City v Hull City
Nottingham Forest v Everton
Sunderland v Crystal Palace

DECEMBER 26
Aston Villa v Leeds United
Coventry City v Chelsea
Crystal Palace v Arsenal
Everton v Sunderland
Fulham v Brighton
Hull City v Liverpool
Ipswich Town v Brentford
Manchester United v Nottingham Forest
Newcastle United v Manchester City
Tottenham Hotspur v Bournemouth

DECEMBER 30
Aston Villa v Liverpool
Coventry City v Brentford
Crystal Palace v Bournemouth
Everton v Manchester City
Fulham v Arsenal
Hull City v Leeds United

North London derby ...Arsenal v Spurs

Ipswich Town v Chelsea
Manchester United v Sunderland
Newcastle United v Nottingham Forest
Tottenham Hotspur v Brighton

JANUARY 2

Arsenal v Ipswich Town
Bournemouth v Aston Villa
Brentford v Crystal Palace
Brighton v Manchester United
Chelsea v Newcastle United
Leeds United v Everton
Liverpool v Coventry City
Manchester City v Tottenham Hotspur
Nottingham Forest v Fulham
Sunderland v Hull City

JANUARY 6

Arsenal v Brentford
Brighton v Bournemouth
Crystal Palace v Chelsea
Everton v Aston Villa
Fulham v Tottenham Hotspur
Ipswich Town v Coventry City
Leeds United v Manchester City
Manchester United v Newcastle United
Nottingham Forest v Hull City
Sunderland v Liverpool

JANUARY 16

Aston Villa v Manchester United
Bournemouth v Ipswich Town
Brentford v Brighton
Chelsea v Sunderland
Coventry City v Everton
Hull City v Arsenal
Liverpool v Crystal Palace
Manchester City v Nottingham Forest
Newcastle United v Fulham
Tottenham Hotspur v Leeds United

JANUARY 23

Arsenal v Newcastle United
Brighton v Manchester City
Crystal Palace v Tottenham Hotspur
Everton v Brentford
Fulham v Aston Villa
Ipswich Town v Hull City
Leeds United v Chelsea
Manchester United v Liverpool
Nottingham Forest v Bournemouth
Sunderland v Coventry City

JANUARY 30

Aston Villa v Ipswich Town
Bournemouth v Fulham
Brentford v Manchester United
Chelsea v Nottingham Forest
Coventry City v Leeds United
Hull City v Crystal Palace
Liverpool v Everton
Manchester City v Arsenal
Newcastle United v Brighton
Tottenham Hotspur v Sunderland

FEBRUARY 6

Arsenal v Liverpool
Brighton v Hull City
Crystal Palace v Coventry City
Everton v Newcastle United
Fulham v Manchester City
Ipswich Town v Tottenham Hotspur
Leeds United v Bournemouth
Manchester United v Chelsea
Nottingham Forest v Brentford
Sunderland v Aston Villa

FEBRUARY 10

Aston Villa v Bournemouth
Coventry City v Liverpool
Crystal Palace v Brentford
Everton v Leeds United
Fulham v Nottingham Forest
Hull City v Sunderland
Ipswich Town v Arsenal
Manchester United v Brighton
Newcastle United v Chelsea
Tottenham Hotspur v Manchester City

FEBRUARY 20

Arsenal v Fulham
Bournemouth v Crystal Palace
Brentford v Coventry City
Brighton v Tottenham Hotspur
Chelsea v Ipswich Town
Leeds United v Aston Villa
Liverpool v Hull City
Manchester City v Newcastle United
Nottingham Forest v Manchester United
Sunderland v Everton

FEBRUARY 27

Aston Villa v Chelsea
Coventry City v Bournemouth
Crystal Palace v Sunderland
Everton v Nottingham Forest
Fulham v Leeds United
Hull City v Manchester City
Ipswich Town v Brighton
Manchester United v Arsenal
Newcastle United v Brentford
Tottenham Hotspur v Liverpool

MARCH 3

Arsenal v Crystal Palace
Bournemouth v Tottenham Hotspur
Brentford v Ipswich Town
Brighton v Fulham
Chelsea v Coventry City
Leeds United v Hull City
Liverpool v Aston Villa
Manchester City v Everton
Nottingham Forest v Newcastle United
Sunderland v Manchester United

MARCH 13

Aston Villa v Hull City
Bournemouth v Newcastle United
Chelsea v Arsenal
Coventry City v Manchester City
Crystal Palace v Fulham
Leeds United v Brighton
Liverpool v Ipswich Town
Manchester United v Everton
Sunderland v Brentford
Tottenham Hotspur v Nottingham Forest

MARCH 20

Arsenal v Sunderland
Brentford v Bournemouth
Brighton v Coventry City
Everton v Tottenham Hotspur
Fulham v Liverpool
Hull City v Chelsea
Ipswich Town v Crystal Palace
Manchester City v Manchester United
Newcastle United v Leeds United
Nottingham Forest v Aston Villa

APRIL 10

Aston Villa v Brighton
Bournemouth v Manchester City
Chelsea v Fulham
Coventry City v Arsenal
Crystal Palace v Everton
Leeds United v Nottingham Forest
Liverpool v Newcastle United
Manchester United v Hull City
Sunderland v Ipswich Town
Tottenham Hotspur v Brentford

Tyne-Wear derby ...Newcastle v Sunderland

APRIL 17

Arsenal v Aston Villa
Brentford v Leeds United
Brighton v Chelsea
Everton v Bournemouth
Fulham v Sunderland
Hull City v Coventry City
Ipswich Town v Manchester United
Manchester City v Crystal Palace
Newcastle United v Tottenham Hotspur
Nottingham Forest v Liverpool

APRIL 24

Aston Villa v Coventry City
Bournemouth v Arsenal
Brentford v Fulham
Chelsea v Manchester City
Everton v Brighton
Leeds United v Liverpool
Manchester United v Crystal Palace
Newcastle United v Ipswich Town
Nottingham Forest v Sunderland
Tottenham Hotspur v Hull City

MAY 1

Arsenal v Tottenham Hotspur
Brighton v Nottingham Forest
Coventry City v Manchester United
Crystal Palace v Aston Villa
Fulham v Everton
Hull City v Bournemouth
Ipswich Town v Leeds United
Liverpool v Chelsea
Manchester City v Brentford
Sunderland v Newcastle United

MAY 8

Bournemouth v Manchester United
Brentford v Aston Villa
Brighton v Sunderland
Everton v Hull City
Fulham v Ipswich Town
Leeds United v Arsenal
Manchester City v Liverpool
Newcastle United v Coventry City
Nottingham Forest v Crystal Palace
Tottenham Hotspur v Chelsea

MAY 15

Arsenal v Nottingham Forest
Aston Villa v Newcastle United
Chelsea v Everton
Coventry City v Tottenham Hotspur
Crystal Palace v Brighton
Hull City v Fulham
Ipswich Town v Manchester City
Liverpool v Brentford
Manchester United v Leeds United
Sunderland v Bournemouth

MAY 23

Bournemouth v Chelsea
Brentford v Hull City
Brighton v Liverpool
Everton v Arsenal
Fulham v Coventry City
Leeds United v Sunderland
Manchester City v Aston Villa
Newcastle United v Crystal Palace
Nottingham Forest v Ipswich Town
Tottenham Hotspur v Manchester United

MAY 30

Arsenal v Brighton
Aston Villa v Tottenham Hotspur
Chelsea v Brentford
Coventry City v Nottingham Forest
Crystal Palace v Leeds United
Hull City v Newcastle United
Ipswich Town v Everton
Liverpool v Bournemouth
Manchester United v Fulham
Sunderland v Manchester City

• Televised schedule for games from October 10 onwards not announced at time of writing. All fixtures subject to change

LA LIGA FIXTURES 2026-27

AUGUST 15
Alaves v Getafe
Sevilla v Rayo Vallecano

AUGUST 16
Racing Santander v Villarreal
Espanyol v Levante
Celta Vigo v Osasuna

AUGUST 17
Deportivo v Elche

AUGUST 19
Atletico Madrid v Malaga

AUGUST 20
Rayo Vallecano v Alaves

AUGUST 21
Real Betis v Real Sociedad

AUGUST 22
Athletic Club v Sevilla
Valencia v Celta Vigo
Espanyol v Real Madrid

AUGUST 23
Atletico Madrid v Villarreal
Getafe v Racing Santander
Elche v Barcelona

AUGUST 24
Osasuna v Levante
Malaga v Deportivo

AUGUST 25
Valencia v Real Betis

AUGUST 26
Real Madrid v Real Sociedad

AUGUST 27
Barcelona v Athletic Club

AUGUST 28
Racing Santander v Elche
Alaves v Villarreal

AUGUST 29
Levante v Real Betis
Real Sociedad v Espanyol
Sevilla v Atletico Madrid

AUGUST 30
Real Madrid v Malaga
Deportivo v Valencia
Celta Vigo v Athletic Club

AUGUST 31
Osasuna v Getafe
Barcelona v Rayo Vallecano

SEPTEMBER 6
Alaves v Osasuna
Athletic Club v Atletico Madrid
Elche Real Sociedad
Espanyol v Sevilla
Getafe v Celta Vigo
Malaga v Levante
Rayo Vallecano v Racing Santander
Real Betis v Real Madrid
Valencia v Barcelona
Villarreal v Deportivo

SEPTEMBER 13
Athletic Club v Elche
Celta Vigo v Malaga
Getafe v Deportivo
Levante v Barcelona
Osasuna v Espanyol
Racing Santander v Alaves
Real Madrid v Rayo Vallecano
Real Sociedad v Atletico Madrid
Sevilla v Valencia
Villarreal v Real Betis

Basque derby... Athletic Club v Real Sociedad

SEPTEMBER 16
Alaves v Valencia
Atletico Madrid v Osasuna
Barcelona v Racing Santander
Deportivo v Sevilla
Elche v Real Madrid
Levante v Athletic Club
Malaga v Villarreal
Rayo Vallecano v Espanyol
Real Betis v Getafe
Real Sociedad v Celta Vigo

SEPTEMBER 20
Athletic Club v Alaves
Atletico Madrid v Real Madrid
Celta Vigo v Racing Santander
Deportivo v Real Betis
Espanyol v Elche
Getafe v Malaga
Osasuna v Rayo Vallecano
Sevilla v Barcelona
Valencia v Real Sociedad
Villarreal v Levante

OCTOBER 11
Alaves v Atletico Madrid
Barcelona v Getafe
Elche v Celta Vigo
Levante v Sevilla
Malaga v Espanyol
Racing Santander v Valencia
Rayo Vallecano v Athletic Club
Real Betis v Osasuna
Real Madrid v Villarreal
Real Sociedad v Deportivo

OCTOBER 18
Celta Vigo v Alaves
Deportivo v Levante
Espanyol v Atletico Madrid
Getafe v Rayo Vallecano
Malaga v Real Sociedad
Osasuna v Racing Santander
Real Betis v Barcelona
Real Madrid v Sevilla
Valencia v Athletic Club
Villarreal v Elche

OCTOBER 25
Alaves v Malaga
Athletic Club v Getafe
Atletico Madrid v Deportivo
Barcelona v Real Madrid
Celta Vigo v Real Betis
Racing Santander v Espanyol
Rayo Vallecano v Elche
Real Sociedad v Levante
Sevilla v Osasuna
Valencia v Villarreal

NOVEMBER 1
Athletic Club v Real Sociedad
Barcelona v Alaves
Deportivo v Osasuna
Elche v Valencia
Getafe v Sevilla
Levante v Atletico Madrid
Racing Santander v Real Madrid
Rayo Vallecano v Celta Vigo
Real Betis v Malaga
Villarreal v Espanyol

NOVEMBER 8
Atletico Madrid v Barcelona
Celta Vigo v Levante
Elche v Real Betis
Espanyol v Deportivo
Malaga v Racing Santander
Osasuna v Athletic Club
Real Sociedad v Rayo Vallecano
Sevilla v Alaves
Valencia v Real Madrid
Villarreal v Getafe

NOVEMBER 22
Alaves v Deportivo
Athletic Club v Espanyol
Barcelona v Villarreal
Getafe v Atletico Madrid
Levante v Elche
Osasuna v Malaga
Racing Santander v Real Sociedad
Rayo Vallecano v Valencia
Real Madrid v Celta Vigo
Sevilla v Real Betis

NOVEMBER 29
Celta Vigo v Villarreal
Deportivo v Barcelona
Elche v Atletico Madrid
Espanyol v Getafe
Levante v Racing Santander
Malaga v Athletic Club
Real Betis v Rayo Vallecano
Real Madrid v Alaves
Real Sociedad v Sevilla
Valencia v Osasuna

DECEMBER 6
Alaves v Espanyol
Athletic Club v Real Madrid
Atletico Madrid v Real Betis
Barcelona v Celta Vigo
Getafe v Valencia
Osasuna v Elche
Racing Santander v Deportivo
Rayo Vallecano v Levante
Sevilla v Malaga
Villarreal v Real Sociedad

DECEMBER 13
Atletico Madrid v Valencia
Deportivo v Athletic Club
Elche v Sevilla
Espanyol v Celta Vigo
Levante v Alaves
Malaga v Barcelona
Real Betis v Racing Santander
Real Madrid v Osasuna
Real Sociedad v Getafe
Villarreal v Rayo Vallecano

DECEMBER 20
Alaves v Elche
Athletic Club v Real Betis
Barcelona v Real Sociedad
Celta Vigo v Atletico Madrid
Deportivo v Real Madrid
Getafe v Levante
Osasuna v Villarreal
Rayo Vallecano v Malaga
Sevilla v Racing Santander
Valencia v Espanyol

JANUARY 3
Celta Vigo v Deportivo
Espanyol v Barcelona
Levante v Valencia

Malaga v Elche
Racing Santander v Athletic Club
Rayo Vallecano v Atletico Madrid
Real Betis v Alaves
Real Madrid v Getafe
Real Sociedad v Osasuna
Villarreal v Sevilla

JANUARY 10

Alaves v Real Sociedad
Athletic Club v Villarreal
Atletico Madrid v Racing Santander
Deportivo v Rayo Vallecano
Elche v Getafe
Espanyol v Real Betis
Osasuna v Barcelona
Real Madrid v Levante
Sevilla v Celta Vigo
Valencia v Malaga

JANUARY 17

Atletico Madrid v Real Sociedad
Barcelona v Elche
Celta Vigo v Valencia
Getafe v Athletic Club
Levante v Espanyol
Malaga v Real Madrid
Racing Santander v Osasuna
Rayo Vallecano v Sevilla
Real Betis v Deportivo
Villarreal v Alaves

JANUARY 24

Alaves v Barcelona
Athletic Club v Levante
Deportivo v Atletico Madrid
Elche v Rayo Vallecano
Espanyol v Villarreal
Getafe v Osasuna
Racing Santander v Celta Vigo
Real Madrid v Real Betis
Real Sociedad v Malaga
Valencia v Sevilla

JANUARY 31

Atletico Madrid v Espanyol
Barcelona v Valencia
Celta Vigo v Getafe
Levante v Real Sociedad
Malaga v Alaves
Osasuna v Deportivo
Rayo Vallecano v Real Madrid
Real Betis v Elche
Sevilla v Athletic Club
Villarreal v Racing Santander

FEBRUARY 7

Alaves v Celta Vigo
Athletic Club v Osasuna
Barcelona v Atletico Madrid
Deportivo v Malaga
Elche v Levante
Espanyol v Rayo Vallecano
Getafe v Villarreal
Real Betis v Sevilla
Real Sociedad v Real Madrid
Valencia v Racing Santander

FEBRUARY 14

Celta Vigo v Rayo Vallecano
Elche v Deportivo
Levante v Malaga
Osasuna v Atletico Madrid
Racing Santander v Getafe
Real Madrid v Athletic Club
Real Sociedad v Real Betis
Sevilla v Espanyol
Valencia v Alaves
Villarreal v Barcelona

FEBRUARY 21

Alaves v Racing Santander
Athletic Club v Celta Vigo
Atletico Madrid v Elche
Barcelona v Levante
Deportivo v Real Sociedad
Espanyol v Osasuna
Malaga v Real Betis
Rayo Vallecano v Getafe
Sevilla v Real Madrid
Villarreal v Valencia

FEBRUARY 28

Athletic Club v Barcelona
Celta Vigo v Espanyol
Getafe v Alaves
Levante v Deportivo
Malaga v Atletico Madrid
Osasuna v Sevilla
Racing Santander v Rayo Vallecano
Real Betis v Villarreal
Real Madrid v Valencia
Real Sociedad v Elche

El Gran Derbi... **Sevilla v Real Betis**

MARCH 7

Alaves v Athletic Club
Atletico Madrid v Celta Vigo
Barcelona v Real Betis
Deportivo v Getafe
Elche v Malaga
Espanyol v Racing Santander
Rayo Vallecano v Osasuna
Sevilla v Real Sociedad
Valencia v Levante
Villarreal v Real Madrid

MARCH 14

Alaves v Sevilla
Athletic Club v Valencia
Barcelona v Deportivo
Elche v Villarreal
Getafe v Real Sociedad
Malaga v Rayo Vallecano
Osasuna v Celta Vigo
Racing Santander v Atletico Madrid
Real Betis v Levante
Real Madrid v Espanyol

MARCH 21

Atletico Madrid v Getafe
Celta Vigo v Real Madrid
Espanyol v Athletic Club
Levante v Osasuna
Racing Santander v Real Betis
Rayo Vallecano v Barcelona
Real Sociedad v Alaves
Sevilla v Elche
Valencia v Deportivo
Villarreal v Malaga

APRIL 4

Athletic Club v Racing Santander
Barcelona v Sevilla
Deportivo v Villarreal
Elche v Alaves
Getafe v Espanyol
Levante v Rayo Vallecano
Malaga v Osasuna
Real Betis v Celta Vigo
Real Madrid v Atletico Madrid
Real Sociedad v Valencia

APRIL 11

Alaves v Real Betis
Atletico Madrid v Levante
Celta Vigo v Elche
Espanyol v Malaga
Osasuna v Real Madrid
Racing Santander v Barcelona
Rayo Vallecano v Real Sociedad
Sevilla v Deportivo
Valencia v Getafe
Villarreal v Athletic Club

APRIL 18

Alaves v Rayo Vallecano
Atletico Madrid v Sevilla
Barcelona v Espanyol
Deportivo v Celta Vigo
Elche v Osasuna
Getafe v Real Madrid
Levante v Villarreal
Malaga v Valencia
Real Betis v Athletic Club
Real Sociedad v Racing Santander

APRIL 21

Athletic Club v Deportivo
Celta Vigo v Barcelona
Espanyol v Real Sociedad
Getafe v Real Betis
Osasuna v Alaves
Racing Santander v Malaga
Real Madrid v Elche
Sevilla v Levante
Valencia v Rayo Vallecano
Villarreal v Atletico Madrid

MAY 2

Atletico Madrid v Alaves
Barcelona v Osasuna
Celta Vigo v Sevilla
Deportivo v Racing Santander
Elche v Espanyol
Levante v Real Madrid
Malaga v Getafe
Rayo Vallecano v Villarreal
Real Betis v Valencia
Real Sociedad v Athletic Club

MAY 9

Alaves v Levante
Athletic Club v Malaga
Getafe v Elche
Osasuna v Real Sociedad
Racing Santander v Sevilla
Rayo Vallecano v Deportivo
Real Betis v Espanyol
Real Madrid v Barcelona
Valencia v Atletico Madrid
Villarreal v Celta Vigo

MAY 16

Atletico Madrid v Rayo Vallecano
Deportivo v Alaves
Elche v Athletic Club
Espanyol v Valencia
Levante v Getafe
Malaga v Celta Vigo
Osasuna v Real Betis
Real Madrid v Racing Santander
Real Sociedad v Barcelona
Sevilla v Villarreal

MAY 23

Alaves v Real Madrid
Atletico Madrid v Athletic Club
Barcelona v Malaga
Celta Vigo v Real Sociedad
Deportivo v Espanyol
Racing Santander v Levante
Rayo Vallecano v Real Betis
Sevilla v Getafe
Valencia v Elche
Villarreal v Osasuna

MAY 30

Athletic Club v Rayo Vallecano
Elche v Racing Santander
Espanyol v Alaves
Getafe v Barcelona
Levante v Celta Vigo
Malaga v Sevilla
Osasuna v Valencia
Real Betis v Atletico Madrid
Real Madrid v Deportivo
Real Sociedad v Villarreal

El Clasico... **Barcelona v Real Madrid**

• Televised schedule for games from September 6 onwards not announced at time of writing. All fixtures subject to change

BUNDESLIGA FIXTURES 2026-27

AUGUST 28
Bayern Munich v Stuttgart

AUGUST 29
Elversberg v Bayer Leverkusen
Cologne v Hoffenheim
Mainz v Paderborn
RB Leipzig v Borussia M'gladbach
Union Berlin v Eintracht Frankfurt
Borussia Dortmund v Hamburg

AUGUST 30
Freiburg v Werder Bremen
Augsburg v Schalke

SEPTEMBER 4
Stuttgart v Cologne

SEPTEMBER 5
Bayer Leverkusen v Union Berlin
Borussia M'gladbach v Elversberg
Hoffenheim v Borussia Dortmund
Paderborn v Freiburg
Werder Bremen v RB Leipzig
Schalke v Bayern Munich

SEPTEMBER 6
Hamburg v Mainz
Eintracht Frankfurt v Augsburg

SEPTEMBER 11
Union Berlin v Schalke

SEPTEMBER 12
Augsburg v Bayer Leverkusen
Borussia Dortmund v Paderborn
Freiburg v Borussia M'gladbach
Hoffenheim v Stuttgart
Mainz v Eintracht Frankfurt
Cologne v Werder Bremen

SEPTEMBER 13
RB Leipzig v Hamburg
Elversberg v Bayern Munich

SEPTEMBER 18
Bayern Munich v Union Berlin

SEPTEMBER 19
Borussia M'gladbach v Mainz
Eintracht Frankfurt v Freiburg
Hamburg v Cologne
Werder Bremen v Augsburg
Stuttgart v Borussia Dortmund

SEPTEMBER 20
Bayer Leverkusen v RB Leipzig
Schalke v Elversberg
Paderborn v Hoffenheim

OCTOBER 10
Augsburg v Bayern Munich
Borussia Dortmund v Werder Bremen
Cologne v Borussia M'gladbach
Freiburg v Schalke
Hoffenheim v Hamburg
Mainz v Bayer Leverkusen
Paderborn v Stuttgart
RB Leipzig v Eintracht Frankfurt
Union Berlin v Elversberg

OCTOBER 17
Bayer Leverkusen v Freiburg
Bayern Munich v RB Leipzig
Borussia M'gladbach v Hoffenheim
Eintracht Frankfurt v Cologne
Elversberg v Augsburg
Hamburg v Stuttgart
Schalke v Mainz
Union Berlin v Borussia Dortmund
Werder Bremen v Paderborn

OCTOBER 24
Augsburg v Union Berlin
Borussia Dortmund v Eintracht Frankfurt
Cologne v Schalke
Freiburg v Bayern Munich
Hoffenheim v Bayer Leverkusen
Mainz v Werder Bremen
Paderborn v Hamburg
RB Leipzig v Elversberg
Stuttgart v Borussia M'gladbach

OCTOBER 31
Augsburg v Freiburg
Bayer Leverkusen v Stuttgart
Bayern Munich v Borussia Dortmund
Borussia M'gladbach v Paderborn
Eintracht Frankfurt v Hamburg
Elversberg v Mainz
Schalke v RB Leipzig
Union Berlin v Cologne
Werder Bremen v Hoffenheim

NOVEMBER 7
Borussia Dortmund v Elversberg
Cologne v Bayer Leverkusen
Freiburg v Union Berlin
Hamburg v Borussia M'gladbach
Hoffenheim v Schalke
Mainz v Bayern Munich
Paderborn v Eintracht Frankfurt
RB Leipzig v Augsburg
Stuttgart v Werder Bremen

NOVEMBER 21
Augsburg v Mainz
Bayer Leverkusen v Paderborn
Bayern Munich v Cologne

East German rivals... RB Leipzig v Union Berlin

Borussia M'gladbach v Borussia Dortmund
Eintracht Frankfurt v Hoffenheim
Elversberg v Freiburg
Schalke v Stuttgart
Union Berlin v RB Leipzig
Werder Bremen v Hamburg

NOVEMBER 28
Borussia Dortmund v Bayer Leverkusen
Cologne v Elversberg
Freiburg v RB Leipzig
Hamburg v Bayern Munich
Hoffenheim v Augsburg
Mainz v Union Berlin
Paderborn v Schalke
Stuttgart v Eintracht Frankfurt
Werder Bremen v Borussia M'gladbach

DECEMBER 5
Augsburg v Cologne
Bayer Leverkusen v Borussia M'gladbach
Bayern Munich v Paderborn
Eintracht Frankfurt v Werder Bremen
Elversberg v Stuttgart
Freiburg v Hoffenheim
RB Leipzig v Mainz
Schalke v Borussia Dortmund
Union Berlin v Hamburg

DECEMBER 12
Borussia Dortmund v Augsburg
Borussia M'gladbach v Eintracht Frankfurt
Cologne v RB Leipzig
Hamburg v Schalke
Hoffenheim v Bayern Munich
Mainz v Freiburg
Paderborn v Elversberg
Stuttgart v Union Berlin
Werder Bremen v Bayer Leverkusen

DECEMBER 19
Augsburg v Paderborn
Bayer Leverkusen v Eintracht Frankfurt
Bayern Munich v Werder Bremen
Elversberg v Hamburg
Freiburg v Stuttgart
Mainz v Cologne
RB Leipzig v Borussia Dortmund
Schalke v Borussia M'gladbach
Union Berlin v Hoffenheim

JANUARY 9
Borussia Dortmund v Mainz
Borussia M'gladbach v Bayern Munich
Cologne v Freiburg
Eintracht Frankfurt v Schalke
Hamburg v Bayer Leverkusen
Hoffenheim v Elversberg
Paderborn v RB Leipzig
Stuttgart v Augsburg
Werder Bremen v Union Berlin

JANUARY 13
Augsburg v Borussia M'gladbach
Bayern Munich v Bayer Leverkusen
Cologne v Borussia Dortmund
Elversberg v Eintracht Frankfurt
Freiburg v Hamburg
Mainz v Hoffenheim
RB Leipzig v Stuttgart
Schalke v Werder Bremen
Union Berlin v Paderborn

JANUARY 16
Bayer Leverkusen v Schalke
Borussia Dortmund v Freiburg
Borussia M'gladbach v Union Berlin
Eintracht Frankfurt v Bayern Munich
Hamburg v Augsburg
Hoffenheim v RB Leipzig
Paderborn v Cologne
Stuttgart v Mainz
Werder Bremen v Elversberg

JANUARY 23
Bayer Leverkusen v Elversberg
Borussia M'gladbach v RB Leipzig
Eintracht Frankfurt v Union Berlin
Hamburg v Borussia Dortmund
Hoffenheim v Cologne
Paderborn v Mainz
Schalke v Augsburg
Stuttgart v Bayern Munich
Werder Bremen v Freiburg

JANUARY 30
Augsburg v Eintracht Frankfurt
Bayern Munich v Schalke
Borussia Dortmund v Hoffenheim
Cologne v Stuttgart

Revierderby...Schalke v Borussia Dortmund

The team to beat... reigning champions Bayern Munich

Elversberg v Borussia M'gladbach
Freiburg v Paderborn
Mainz v Hamburg
RB Leipzig v Werder Bremen
Union Berlin v Bayer Leverkusen

FEBRUARY 6

Bayer Leverkusen v Augsburg
Bayern Munich v Elversberg
Borussia M'gladbach v Freiburg
Eintracht Frankfurt v Mainz
Hamburg v RB Leipzig
Paderborn v Borussia Dortmund
Schalke v Union Berlin
Stuttgart v Hoffenheim
Werder Bremen v Cologne

FEBRUARY 13

Augsburg v Werder Bremen
Borussia Dortmund v Stuttgart
Cologne v Hamburg
Elversberg v Schalke
Freiburg v Eintracht Frankfurt
Hoffenheim v Paderborn
Mainz v Borussia M'gladbach
RB Leipzig v Bayer Leverkusen
Union Berlin v Bayern Munich

FEBRUARY 20

Bayer Leverkusen v Mainz
Bayern Munich v Augsburg
Borussia M'gladbach v Cologne
Eintracht Frankfurt v RB Leipzig
Elversberg v Union Berlin
Hamburg v Hoffenheim
Schalke v Freiburg
Stuttgart v Paderborn
Werder Bremen v Borussia Dortmund

FEBRUARY 27

Augsburg v Elversberg
Borussia Dortmund v Union Berlin
Cologne v Eintracht Frankfurt
Freiburg v Bayer Leverkusen
Hoffenheim v Borussia M'gladbach
Mainz v Schalke
Paderborn v Werder Bremen
RB Leipzig v Bayern Munich
Stuttgart v Hamburg

MARCH 3

Bayer Leverkusen v Hoffenheim
Bayern Munich v Freiburg
Borussia M'gladbach v Stuttgart
Eintracht Frankfurt v Borussia Dortmund
Elversberg v RB Leipzig
Hamburg v Paderborn
Schalke v Cologne
Union Berlin v Augsburg
Werder Bremen v Mainz

MARCH 6

Borussia Dortmund v Bayern Munich
Cologne v Union Berlin
Freiburg v Augsburg
Hamburg v Eintracht Frankfurt
Hoffenheim v Werder Bremen
Mainz v Elversberg
Paderborn v Borussia M'gladbach
RB Leipzig v Schalke
Stuttgart v Bayer Leverkusen

MARCH 13

Augsburg v RB Leipzig
Bayer Leverkusen v Cologne
Bayern Munich v Mainz
Borussia M'gladbach v Hamburg
Eintracht Frankfurt v Paderborn
Elversberg v Borussia Dortmund
Schalke v Hoffenheim
Union Berlin v Freiburg
Werder Bremen v Stuttgart

MARCH 20

Borussia Dortmund v Borussia M'gladbach
Cologne v Bayern Munich
Freiburg v Elversberg
Hamburg v Werder Bremen
Hoffenheim v Eintracht Frankfurt
Mainz v Augsburg
Paderborn v Bayer Leverkusen
RB Leipzig v Union Berlin
Stuttgart v Schalke

APRIL 3

Augsburg v Hoffenheim
Bayer Leverkusen v Borussia Dortmund
Bayern Munich v Hamburg
Borussia M'gladbach v Werder Bremen
Eintracht Frankfurt v Stuttgart
Elversberg v Cologne
RB Leipzig v Freiburg
Schalke v Paderborn
Union Berlin v Mainz

APRIL 10

Borussia Dortmund v Schalke
Borussia M'gladbach v Bayer Leverkusen
Cologne v Augsburg
Hamburg v Union Berlin
Hoffenheim v Freiburg
Mainz v RB Leipzig
Paderborn v Bayern Munich
Stuttgart v Elversberg
Werder Bremen v Eintracht Frankfurt

APRIL 17

Augsburg v Borussia Dortmund
Bayer Leverkusen v Werder Bremen
Bayern Munich v Hoffenheim
Eintracht Frankfurt v Borussia M'gladbach
Elversberg v Paderborn
Freiburg v Mainz
RB Leipzig v Cologne
Schalke v Hamburg
Union Berlin v Stuttgart

APRIL 24

Borussia Dortmund v RB Leipzig
Borussia M'gladbach v Schalke
Cologne v Mainz
Eintracht Frankfurt v Bayer Leverkusen
Hamburg v Elversberg
Hoffenheim v Union Berlin
Paderborn v Augsburg
Stuttgart v Freiburg
Werder Bremen v Bayern Munich

MAY 8

Augsburg v Stuttgart
Bayer Leverkusen v Hamburg
Bayern Munich v Borussia M'gladbach
Elversberg v Hoffenheim
Freiburg v Cologne
Mainz v Borussia Dortmund
RB Leipzig v Paderborn
Schalke v Eintracht Frankfurt
Union Berlin v Werder Bremen

MAY 15

Bayer Leverkusen v Bayern Munich
Borussia Dortmund v Cologne
Borussia M'gladbach v Augsburg
Eintracht Frankfurt v Elversberg
Hamburg v Freiburg
Hoffenheim v Mainz
Paderborn v Union Berlin
Stuttgart v RB Leipzig
Werder Bremen v Schalke

MAY 22

Augsburg v Hamburg
Bayern Munich v Eintracht Frankfurt
Cologne v Paderborn
Elversberg v Werder Bremen
Freiburg v Borussia Dortmund
Mainz v Stuttgart
RB Leipzig v Hoffenheim
Schalke v Bayer Leverkusen
Union Berlin v Borussia M'gladbach

• Televised schedule for games from October 10 onwards not announced at time of writing. All fixtures subject to change

SERIE A FIXTURES 2026-27

AUGUST 22
Internazionale v Monza
Udinese v Como
Genoa v Napoli
Parma v Cagliari

AUGUST 23
Frosinone v Juventus
Venezia v Lecce
Atalanta v Sassuolo
Torino v Milan

AUGUST 24
Bologna v Lazio
Roma v Fiorentina

AUGUST 28
Milan v Venezia

AUGUST 29
Fiorentina v Frosinone
Monza v Udinese
Sassuolo v Torino
Juventus v Parma

AUGUST 30
Napoli v Como
Cagliari v Internazionale
Lazio v Genoa

AUGUST 31
Lecce v Roma
Atalanta v Bologna

SEPTEMBER 4
Genoa v Como

SEPTEMBER 5
Fiorentina v Torino
Internazionale v Napoli
Roma v Atalanta

SEPTEMBER 6
Frosinone v Venezia
Parma v Monza
Bologna v Sassuolo
Juventus v Milan

SEPTEMBER 7
Cagliari v Lecce
Udinese v Lazio

SEPTEMBER 11
Venezia v Fiorentina

SEPTEMBER 12
Genoa v Frosinone
Sassuolo v Juventus
Atalanta v Cagliari

SEPTEMBER 13
Torino v Roma
Como v Parma
Lecce v Monza
Napoli v Bologna
Lazio v Milan

SEPTEMBER 14
Internazionale v Udinese

SEPTEMBER 18
Monza v Sassuolo

SEPTEMBER 19
Bologna v Torino
Udinese v Cagliari
Roma v Internazionale
Venezia v Lazio

SEPTEMBER 20
Fiorentina v Napoli
Frosinone v Como
Parma v Genoa
Juventus v Atalanta
Milan v Lecce

OCTOBER 11
Atalanta v Venezia
Cagliari v Juventus
Como v Roma
Genoa v Fiorentina
Internazionale v Parma
Lazio v Monza
Lecce v Bologna
Napoli v Frosinone
Sassuolo v Milan
Torino v Udinese

OCTOBER 17
Bologna v Internazionale
Fiorentina v Como
Frosinone v Sassuolo
Juventus v Lazio
Milan v Atalanta
Monza v Cagliari
Parma v Torino
Roma v Genoa
Udinese v Lecce
Venezia v Napoli

OCTOBER 24
Atalanta v Frosinone
Cagliari v Bologna
Como v Sassuolo
Genoa v Venezia
Internazionale v Fiorentina
Lazio v Parma
Lecce v Juventus
Napoli v Roma
Torino v Monza
Udinese v Milan

OCTOBER 28
Fiorentina v Atalanta
Frosinone v Lecce
Genoa v Juventus
Milan v Bologna
Monza v Napoli
Parma v Udinese
Roma v Cagliari
Sassuolo v Lazio
Torino v Como
Venezia v Internazionale

NOVEMBER 1
Atalanta v Parma
Bologna v Monza
Como v Venezia
Frosinone v Torino
Juventus v Napoli
Lazio v Cagliari
Lecce v Genoa
Milan v Internazionale
Sassuolo v Fiorentina
Udinese v Roma

NOVEMBER 8
Cagliari v Frosinone
Fiorentina v Juventus
Genoa v Milan
Internazionale v Como
Monza v Atalanta
Napoli v Lazio
Parma v Bologna
Roma v Sassuolo
Torino v Lecce
Venezia v Udinese

NOVEMBER 22
Atalanta v Internazionale
Bologna v Udinese
Como v Cagliari
Juventus v Venezia
Lazio v Lecce
Milan v Frosinone
Monza v Fiorentina
Napoli v Torino
Parma v Roma
Sassuolo v Genoa

NOVEMBER 29
Cagliari v Milan
Como v Juventus
Frosinone v Parma
Internazionale v Genoa
Lecce v Atalanta
Roma v Monza
Sassuolo v Napoli
Torino v Lazio
Udinese v Fiorentina
Venezia v Bologna

DECEMBER 6
Bologna v Roma
Fiorentina v Cagliari
Frosinone v Internazionale
Genoa v Torino
Juventus v Udinese
Lazio v Atalanta
Milan v Parma
Monza v Como
Napoli v Lecce
Venezia v Sassuolo

DECEMBER 13
Atalanta v Genoa
Cagliari v Venezia
Como v Bologna
Internazionale v Torino
Juventus v Monza
Lazio v Roma
Lecce v Sassuolo
Napoli v Milan
Parma v Fiorentina
Udinese v Frosinone

Derby della Madonnina
...Milan v Internazionale

DECEMBER 20
Atalanta v Napoli
Fiorentina v Bologna
Frosinone v Lazio
Genoa v Udinese
Lecce v Internazionale
Milan v Como
Roma v Juventus
Sassuolo v Parma
Torino v Cagliari
Venezia v Monza

JANUARY 3
Bologna v Juventus
Cagliari v Genoa
Como v Lecce
Fiorentina v Lazio
Internazionale v Sassuolo
Monza v Milan
Parma v Napoli
Roma v Frosinone
Torino v Venezia
Udinese v Atalanta

JANUARY 6
Atalanta v Como
Frosinone v Bologna

Derby della Capitale
...Lazio v Roma

Genoa v Monza
Juventus v Torino
Lazio v Internazionale
Lecce v Parma
Milan v Fiorentina
Napoli v Cagliari
Sassuolo v Udinese
Venezia v Roma

JANUARY 10

Bologna v Genoa
Cagliari v Sassuolo
Como v Lazio
Fiorentina v Lecce
Internazionale v Juventus
Monza v Frosinone
Parma v Venezia
Roma v Milan
Torino v Atalanta
Udinese v Napoli

JANUARY 17

Atalanta v Roma
Cagliari v Como
Juventus v Genoa
Lazio v Bologna
Lecce v Udinese
Milan v Torino
Napoli v Fiorentina
Parma v Internazionale
Sassuolo v Monza
Venezia v Frosinone

JANUARY 24

Bologna v Atalanta
Como v Napoli
Fiorentina v Sassuolo
Frosinone v Milan
Genoa v Parma
Internazionale v Venezia
Juventus v Cagliari
Lecce v Torino
Monza v Lazio
Roma v Udinese

JANUARY 31

Atalanta v Fiorentina
Cagliari v Parma
Genoa v Lecce
Lazio v Venezia
Milan v Juventus
Monza v Roma
Napoli v Internazionale
Sassuolo v Como
Torino v Frosinone
Udinese v Bologna

FEBRUARY 7

Atalanta v Lazio
Bologna v Milan
Como v Monza
Fiorentina v Udinese
Internazionale v Cagliari
Juventus v Sassuolo
Lecce v Napoli
Parma v Frosinone
Roma v Torino
Venezia v Genoa

FEBRUARY 14

Bologna v Como
Cagliari v Lazio
Frosinone v Fiorentina
Genoa v Atalanta
Internazionale v Milan
Monza v Lecce
Napoli v Juventus
Roma v Parma
Torino v Sassuolo
Udinese v Venezia

FEBRUARY 21

Atalanta v Monza
Como v Torino
Fiorentina v Internazionale
Juventus v Bologna
Lazio v Napoli
Lecce v Frosinone
Milan v Genoa
Sassuolo v Roma
Udinese v Parma
Venezia v Cagliari

FEBRUARY 28

Bologna v Lecce
Cagliari v Udinese
Como v Milan
Frosinone v Napoli
Genoa v Lazio
Internazionale v Atalanta
Monza v Juventus
Parma v Sassuolo
Roma v Venezia
Torino v Fiorentina

MARCH 7

Atalanta v Torino
Fiorentina v Venezia
Juventus v Roma
Lazio v Frosinone
Lecce v Como
Milan v Cagliari
Monza v Genoa
Napoli v Parma
Sassuolo v Bologna
Udinese v Internazionale

MARCH 14

Bologna v Napoli
Cagliari v Fiorentina
Como v Udinese
Frosinone v Monza
Genoa v Roma
Lazio v Juventus
Milan v Sassuolo
Parma v Lecce
Torino v Internazionale
Venezia v Atalanta

MARCH 21

Atalanta v Milan
Fiorentina v Genoa
Internazionale v Frosinone
Juventus v Como
Monza v Bologna
Napoli v Venezia
Parma v Lazio
Roma v Lecce
Sassuolo v Cagliari
Udinese v Torino

APRIL 4

Cagliari v Napoli
Como v Fiorentina
Frosinone v Udinese
Genoa v Internazionale
Lecce v Lazio
Milan v Monza
Roma v Bologna
Sassuolo v Atalanta
Torino v Juventus
Venezia v Parma

APRIL 11

Bologna v Venezia
Cagliari v Atalanta
Fiorentina v Milan
Frosinone v Genoa
Internazionale v Roma
Juventus v Lecce
Lazio v Torino
Napoli v Sassuolo
Parma v Como
Udinese v Monza

APRIL 18

Atalanta v Udinese
Bologna v Cagliari
Como v Frosinone
Fiorentina v Parma
Milan v Napoli
Monza v Internazionale
Roma v Lazio
Sassuolo v Lecce
Torino v Genoa
Venezia v Juventus

APRIL 25

Cagliari v Monza
Frosinone v Roma
Genoa v Sassuolo
Internazionale v Bologna
Juventus v Fiorentina
Lazio v Como
Lecce v Milan
Napoli v Udinese
Parma v Atalanta
Venezia v Torino

MAY 2

Atalanta v Juventus
Bologna v Fiorentina
Como v Internazionale
Lecce v Cagliari
Milan v Lazio
Monza v Venezia
Roma v Napoli
Sassuolo v Frosinone
Torino v Parma
Udinese v Genoa

MAY 9

Fiorentina v Roma
Frosinone v Atalanta
Genoa v Cagliari
Internazionale v Lecce
Lazio v Sassuolo
Napoli v Monza
Parma v Milan
Torino v Bologna
Udinese v Juventus
Venezia v Como

MAY 16

Bologna v Frosinone
Cagliari v Torino
Como v Atalanta
Juventus v Internazionale
Lazio v Udinese
Lecce v Fiorentina
Milan v Roma
Monza v Parma
Napoli v Genoa
Sassuolo v Venezia

MAY 23

Atalanta v Lecce
Fiorentina v Monza
Frosinone v Cagliari
Genoa v Bologna
Internazionale v Lazio
Parma v Juventus
Roma v Como
Torino v Napoli
Udinese v Sassuolo
Venezia v Milan

MAY 30

Bologna v Parma
Cagliari v Roma
Como v Genoa
Juventus v Frosinone
Lazio v Fiorentina
Lecce v Venezia
Milan v Udinese
Monza v Torino
Napoli v Atalanta
Sassuolo v Internazionale

Italian upstarts...Como

Televised schedule for games from October 11 onwards not announced at time of writing. All fixtures subject to change

LIGUE 1 FIXTURES 2026-27

AUGUST 21
Marseille v Strasbourg

AUGUST 22
Lens v Auxerre
Le Mans v Brest
Nice v Lorient
Toulouse v Lyon
Troyes v Paris FC

AUGUST 23
Angers v Lille
Le Havre v Monaco
Paris Saint-Germain v Rennes

AUGUST 28
Lille v Paris Saint-Germain

AUGUST 29
Strasbourg v Lens
Auxerre v Angers
Brest v Toulouse
Lorient v Troyes
Lyon v Le Havre

AUGUST 30
Paris FC v Nice
Rennes v Le Mans
Monaco v Marseille

SEPTEMBER 5
Angers v Rennes
Le Havre v Brest
Lens v Lorient
Lyon v Auxerre
Marseille v Paris FC
Nice v Le Mans
Paris Saint-Germain v Monaco
Toulouse v Lille
Troyes v Strasbourg

SEPTEMBER 12
Auxerre v Nice
Brest v Paris Saint-Germain
Le Havre v Angers
Le Mans v Lens
Lille v Troyes
Lorient v Toulouse
Paris FC v Lyon
Rennes v Marseille
Strasbourg v Monaco

SEPTEMBER 19
Angers v Troyes
Auxerre v Brest
Le Mans v Lorient
Lyon v Rennes
Monaco v Lens
Nice v Lille
Paris FC v Strasbourg
Toulouse v Le Havre

SEPTEMBER 20
Marseille v Paris Saint-Germain

OCTOBER 10
Brest v Angers
Lens v Lyon
Lille v Le Havre
Lorient v Paris FC
Monaco v Toulouse
Nice v Strasbourg
Paris Saint-Germain v Le Mans
Rennes v Auxerre
Troyes v Marseille

OCTOBER 17
Angers v Marseille
Le Havre v Auxerre
Le Mans v Toulouse
Lille v Brest
Lorient v Monaco
Lyon v Nice
Paris FC v Rennes
Strasbourg v Paris Saint-Germain
Troyes v Lens

OCTOBER 24
Angers v Lorient
Auxerre v Le Mans
Brest v Nice
Lens v Paris FC
Marseille v Le Havre
Monaco v Lille
Rennes v Strasbourg
Toulouse v Troyes

OCTOBER 25
Paris Saint-Germain v Lyon

OCTOBER 31
Le Havre v Paris Saint-Germain
Lille v Lens
Lorient v Brest
Lyon v Angers
Marseille v Toulouse
Nice v Rennes
Paris FC v Monaco
Strasbourg v Auxerre
Troyes v Le Mans

NOVEMBER 7
Angers v Nice
Auxerre v Paris FC
Brest v Lyon
Le Havre v Lorient
Le Mans v Monaco
Lens v Marseille
Paris Saint-Germain v Troyes
Rennes v Lille
Toulouse v Strasbourg

NOVEMBER 21
Lens v Toulouse
Lille v Lyon
Lorient v Rennes
Marseille v Le Mans
Monaco v Auxerre
Nice v Paris Saint-Germain
Paris FC v Angers
Strasbourg v Brest
Troyes v Le Havre

NOVEMBER 28
Angers v Lens
Auxerre v Marseille
Brest v Paris FC
Le Havre v Strasbourg
Le Mans v Lille
Lyon v Monaco
Nice v Troyes
Paris Saint-Germain v Lorient
Toulouse v Rennes

DECEMBER 5
Lens v Le Havre
Lille v Auxerre
Marseille v Nice
Monaco v Angers
Paris FC v Le Mans
Rennes v Brest
Strasbourg v Lorient
Toulouse v Paris Saint-Germain
Troyes v Lyon

DECEMBER 12
Angers v Strasbourg
Auxerre v Toulouse
Brest v Troyes
Le Havre v Le Mans
Lorient v Lille
Nice v Lens
Paris Saint-Germain v Paris FC
Rennes v Monaco

DECEMBER 13
Lyon v Marseille

JANUARY 2
Brest v Marseille
Le Mans v Lyon
Lille v Strasbourg
Lorient v Auxerre
Monaco v Nice
Paris FC v Le Havre
Toulouse v Angers
Troyes v Rennes

JANUARY 3
Lens v Paris Saint-Germain

Capital clubs...Paris FC v Paris Saint-Germain

Choc des Olympiques ...Marseille v Lyon

JANUARY 16
Angers v Paris Saint-Germain
Auxerre v Troyes
Lyon v Lorient
Marseille v Lille
Monaco v Brest
Nice v Le Havre
Paris FC v Toulouse
Rennes v Lens
Strasbourg v Le Mans

JANUARY 23
Le Havre v Rennes
Le Mans v Angers
Lens v Brest
Lille v Paris FC
Lorient v Marseille
Paris Saint-Germain v Auxerre
Strasbourg v Lyon
Toulouse v Nice
Troyes v Monaco

JANUARY 30
Angers v Le Havre
Brest v Strasbourg
Le Mans v Nice
Lyon v Lille
Marseille v Troyes
Monaco v Paris Saint-Germain
Paris FC v Auxerre
Rennes v Lorient
Toulouse v Lens

FEBRUARY 6
Auxerre v Monaco
Le Havre v Toulouse
Lens v Angers
Lorient v Le Mans
Nice v Brest
Rennes v Lyon
Strasbourg v Paris FC
Troyes v Lille

FEBRUARY 7
Paris Saint-Germain v Marseille

FEBRUARY 13
Auxerre v Strasbourg
Brest v Rennes
Le Mans v Paris Saint-Germain
Lille v Nice
Lorient v Le Havre
Lyon v Lens
Marseille v Angers
Paris FC v Troyes
Toulouse v Monaco

FEBRUARY 20
Angers v Paris FC
Le Havre v Lyon
Lens v Troyes
Lille v Lorient
Monaco v Le Mans
Nice v Auxerre
Paris Saint-Germain v Brest
Rennes v Toulouse
Strasbourg v Marseille

FEBRUARY 27
Auxerre v Lille
Brest v Monaco
Le Mans v Paris FC
Lorient v Angers
Lyon v Toulouse
Marseille v Rennes
Strasbourg v Le Havre
Troyes v Nice

FEBRUARY 28
Paris Saint-Germain v Lens

MARCH 6
Angers v Auxerre
Le Havre v Nice
Lens v Strasbourg
Lille v Marseille
Monaco v Lyon
Paris FC v Brest
Rennes v Paris Saint-Germain
Toulouse v Le Mans
Troyes v Lorient

MARCH 13
Auxerre v Paris Saint-Germain
Brest v Lille
Le Havre v Lens
Le Mans v Rennes
Lyon v Troyes
Marseille v Monaco
Nice v Toulouse
Paris FC v Lorient
Strasbourg v Angers

MARCH 20
Angers v Le Mans
Lens v Lille
Lorient v Nice
Monaco v Le Havre
Paris Saint-Germain v Strasbourg
Rennes v Paris FC
Toulouse v Brest
Troyes v Auxerre

MARCH 21
Marseille v Lyon

APRIL 3
Angers v Monaco
Auxerre v Lens
Brest v Lorient
Le Havre v Troyes
Le Mans v Marseille
Lille v Rennes
Nice v Lyon
Paris FC v Paris Saint-Germain
Strasbourg v Toulouse

APRIL 10
Le Mans v Auxerre
Lille v Toulouse
Lorient v Lens
Lyon v Strasbourg
Marseille v Brest
Monaco v Rennes
Nice v Paris FC
Paris Saint-Germain v Le Havre
Troyes v Angers

APRIL 17
Angers v Lyon
Auxerre v Lorient
Brest v Le Mans
Le Havre v Marseille
Lens v Nice
Monaco v Strasbourg
Paris Saint-Germain v Lille
Rennes v Troyes
Toulouse v Paris FC

APRIL 24
Le Mans v Le Havre
Lille v Monaco
Lorient v Paris Saint-Germain
Lyon v Brest
Marseille v Auxerre
Nice v Angers
Paris FC v Lens
Strasbourg v Rennes
Troyes v Toulouse

MAY 1
Auxerre v Lyon
Le Havre v Paris FC
Lens v Le Mans
Monaco v Lorient
Paris Saint-Germain v Angers
Rennes v Nice
Strasbourg v Lille
Toulouse v Marseille
Troyes v Brest

MAY 8
Angers v Toulouse
Brest v Auxerre
Le Mans v Troyes
Lens v Monaco
Lorient v Strasbourg
Nice v Marseille
Paris FC v Lille
Rennes v Le Havre

MAY 9
Lyon v Paris Saint-Germain

MAY 16
Auxerre v Rennes
Brest v Le Havre
Lille v Angers
Lyon v Le Mans
Marseille v Lens
Monaco v Paris FC
Paris Saint-Germain V Nice
Strasbourg v Troyes
Toulouse v Lorient

MAY 22
Angers v Brest
Le Havre v Lille
Le Mans v Strasbourg
Lens v Rennes
Lorient v Lyon
Nice v Monaco
Paris FC v Marseille
Toulouse v Auxerre
Troyes v Paris Saint-Germain

MAY 29
Auxerre v Le Havre
Brest v Lens
Lille v Le Mans
Lyon v Paris FC
Marseille v Lorient
Monaco v Troyes
Paris Saint-Germain v Toulouse
Rennes v Angers
Strasbourg v Nice

Ligue 1 new boys...Le Mans

Televised schedule for games from September 5 onwards not announced at time of writing. All fixtures subject to change.

Club Football

EUROPE

2026-27 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Second Qualifying Round – 1st Leg

Jul 21-22:
Mjallby (Swe) 3-0 Lincoln Red Imps (Gib); Larne (Nir) 0-4 Red Star Belgrade (Srb); Sabah (Aze) 1-0 KuPS (Fin); KI (Fro) 0-0 Kauno Zalgiris (Ltu); AGF (Den) 1-4 Lech Poznan (Pol); Ararat-Armenia (Arm) 2-0 Shamrock Rovers (Irl); Thun (Sui) 1-1 Dinamo Zagreb (Cro); Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) 2-1 Hapoel Be'er Sheva (Isr); Iberia 1999 (Geo) 0-2 Slovan Bratislava (Svk); Fenerbahce (Tur) 1-0 Gornik Zabrze (Pol); Sturm Graz (Aut) 4-0 Hearts (Sco); Levski Sofia (Bul) 1-0 Universitatea Craiova (Rou); Omonia (Cyp) 1-0 Kairat (Kaz); Egnatia (Alb) 3-3 Celje (Svn)

Second Qualifying Round – 2nd Leg

Jul 28-29:
Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) 0-0 Mjallby (Swe) (agg 0-3); Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 2-1 Ararat-Armenia (Arm) (agg 2-3); Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 3-2 Thun (Sui) (agg 4-3, *AET*); Celje (Svn) 2-2 Egnatia (Alb) (agg 5-5, *AET, Celje win 4-1 on pens*); Hearts (Sco) 0-2 Sturm Graz (Aut) (agg 0-6); KuPS (Fin) 0-2 Sabah (Aze) (agg 0-3); Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 5-0 Larne (Nir) (agg 9-0); Kauno Zalgiris (Ltu) 1-0 KI (Fro) (agg 1-0); Lech Poznan (Pol) 1-4 AGF (Den) (agg 5-5, *AET, AGF win 4-3 on pens*); Universitatea Craiova (Rou) 2-2 Levski Sofia (Bul) (agg 2-3); Kairat (Kaz) 1-0 Omonia (Cyp) (agg 1-1, *AET, Kairat win 6-5 on pens*); Hapoel Be'er Sheva (Isr) 2-0 Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) (agg 3-2); Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 1-1 Iberia 1999 (Geo) (agg 3-1); Gornik Zabrze (Pol) 1-1 Fenerbahce (Tur) (agg 1-2)

Third Qualifying Round – 1st Leg

Aug 4-5:
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 5-0 Kauno Zalgiris (Ltu); Mjallby (Swe) 1-2 Slovan Bratislava (Svk); Levski Sofia (Bul) 1-0 Kairat (Kaz); Ararat-Armenia (Arm) 2-1 Celje (Svn); Hapoel Be'er Sheva (Isr) 1-0 Red Star Belgrade (Srb); Olympiacos (Gre) 0-0 NEC (Ned); Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 3-3 Bodo/Glimt (Nor); Sparta Prague (Cze) 2-1 Lyon (Fra); AGF (Den) 2-1 Sabah (Aze); Fenerbahce (Tur) 2-0 Sturm Graz (Aut)

Third Qualifying Round – 2nd Leg

Aug 11:
Kauno Zalgiris (Ltu) 1-2 Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) (agg 2-7); Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 2-0 Mjallby (Swe) (agg 4-1); Kairat (Kaz) 0-1 Levski Sofia (Bul) (agg 0-2); Celje (Svn) 2-0 Ararat-Armenia (Arm) (agg 3-2); Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 0-2 Hapoel Be'er Sheva (Isr) (agg 0-3); NEC (Ned) 2-1 Olympiacos (Gre) (agg 2-1, *AET*); Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 3-2 Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) (agg 6-5, *AET*); Lyon (Fra) 3-0 Sparta Prague (Cze) (agg 4-2); Sabah (Aze) 4-0 AGF (Den) (agg 5-2); Sturm Graz (Aut) 0-1 Fenerbahce (Tur) (agg 0-3)

2026-27 EUROPA LEAGUE

Second Qualifying Round – 1st Leg

Jul 23:
Hammarby (Swe) 1-1 Anderlecht (Bel); Qarabag (Aze) 0-0 CSKA Sofia (Bul); Tromso (Nor) 0-1 Hradec Kralove (Cze); Twente (Ned) 1-2 Ferencvaros (Hun); Besiktas (Tur) 1-0 Midtjylland (Den); Hajduk Split (Cro) 2-0 Pafos (Cyp); Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) 0-5 Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr); St Gallen (Sui) 2-1 Benfica (Por); Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) 2-3 PAOK (Gre)

Second Qualifying Round – 2nd Leg

Jul 30:
Anderlecht (Bel) 3-1 Hammarby (Swe) (agg 4-2); CSKA Sofia (Bul) 0-0 Qarabag (Aze) (agg 0-0, *AET, CSKA Sofia win 5-4 on pens*); Hradec Kralove (Cze) 3-1 Tromso (Nor) (agg 4-1); Ferencvaros (Hun) 2-2 Twente (Ned) (agg 4-3); Midtjylland (Den) 0-2 Besiktas (Tur) (agg 0-3); Pafos (Cyp) 4-0 Hajduk Split (Cro) (agg 4-2, *AET*); Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 1-0 Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) (agg 6-0); Benfica (Por) 5-0 St Gallen (Sui) (agg 6-2); PAOK (Gre) 2-0 Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) (agg 5-2)

Third Qualifying Round – 1st Leg

Aug 4-6:
Larne (Nir) 0-0 Iberia 1999 (Geo); Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 3-1 Egnatia (Alb); Ferencvaros (Hun) 1-0 Gornik Zabrze (Pol); Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) 1-1 Omonia (Cyp); KuPS (Fin) 1-1 Universitatea Craiova (Rou); Lech Poznan (Pol) 1-0 KI (Fro); Thun (Sui) 3-0 Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl); Hradec Kralove (Cze) 0-1 Besiktas (Tur); Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 2-1 Rangers (Sco); PAOK (Gre) 0-1 Anderlecht (Bel); Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 1-0 Pafos (Cyp); Benfica (Por) 6-1 Hearts (Sco); Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 0-3 CSKA Sofia (Bul)

Third Qualifying Round – 2nd Leg

Aug 11-13:
Iberia 1999 (Geo) 2-1 Larne (Nir) (agg 2-1, *AET*); Egnatia (Alb) 5-1 Shamrock Rovers (Irl) (agg 6-4); Gornik Zabrze (Pol) 1-1 Ferencvaros (Hun) (agg 1-2); Omonia (Cyp) 1-0 Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) (agg 2-1); Universitatea Craiova (Rou) 2-1 KuPS (Fin) (agg 3-2); Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) 3-2 Thun (Sui) (agg 3-5); Besiktas (Tur) 1-0 Hradec Kralove (Cze) (agg 2-0); Rangers (Sco) 1-1 Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) (agg 2-3); Anderlecht (Bel) 3-2 PAOK (Gre) (agg 4-2); Pafos (Cyp) 3-3 Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) (agg 3-4); Hearts (Sco) 1-1 Benfica (Por) (agg 2-7); CSKA Sofia (Bul) 1-3 Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) (agg 4-3); KI (Fro) v Lech Poznan (Pol) *(postponed and incomplete at the time of writing)*

2026-27 CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Second Qualifying Round – 1st Leg

Jul 21-23:
Atert Bissen (Lux) 2-6 ETO Gyor (Hun); Floriana (Mal) 1-1 Drita (Kos); IFK Goteborg (Swe) 1-2 FCI Levadia (Est); Vardar (Mke) 2-3 Riga (Lva); Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur) 1-1 Inter Turku (Fin); Neftci (Aze) 2-4 Dinamo Minsk (Blr); Zeleznicar Pancevo (Srb) 0-1 Braga (Por); Bohemians (Irl) 2-1 Ballkani (Kos); Spartak Trnava (Svk) 0-0 CSKA 1948 (Bul); Borac Banja Luka (Bih) 3-0 Petrocub Hincesti (Mda); ML Vitebsk (Blr) 3-0 Sutjeska (Mne); Flora (Est) 1-0 The New Saints (Wal); Rijeka (Cro) 1-0 Derry City (Irl); Lugano (Sui) 1-0 Dukagjini (Kos); HJK (Fin) 5-0 Coleraine (Nir); FCSB (Rou) 2-3 Auda (Lva); RFS (Lva) 4-1 Vestri (Isl); Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) 3-1 Valletta (Mal); Liepaja (Lva) 0-2 Austria Vienna (Aut); Debrecen (Hun) 1-0 Pyunik (Arm); GAIS (Swe) 1-0 Nordsjaelland (Den); Zilina (Svk) 2-1 GKS Katowice (Pol); Varazdin (Cro) 3-2 Jablonec (Cze); Dila Gori (Geo) 0-4 Apollon Limassol (Cyp); Bravo (Svn) 2-1 Shkendija (Mkd); Universitatea Cluj (Rou) 2-2 Brann (Nor); Shelbourne (Irl) 5-2 Nomme Kalju (Est); Valur (Isl) 1-0 Zrinjski Mostar (Bih); Zimbru Chisinau (Mda) 1-1 Noah (Arm); Dinamo Tbilisi (Geo) 3-0 Zalgiris (Ltu); Aluminij (Svn) 1-1 Dinamo City (Alb); DAC Dunajska Streda (Svk) 1-0 Velez Mostar (Bih); BATE Borisov (Blr) 1-1 Sion (Sui); Stjarnan (Isl) 1-0 Ilves (Fin); Motherwell (Sco) 2-0 HB (Fro); Panevezys (Ltu) 1-1 Tobol (Kaz); Malisheva (Kos) 2-0 Hibernian (Sco); Paks (Hun) 1-2 Panathinaikos (Gre); Vojvodina (Srb) 1-4 Ajax (Ned); Polissya Zhytomyr (Ukr) 3-3 Copenhagen (Den); LNZ Cherkasy (Ukr) 0-0 Gent (Bel); FC Santa Coloma (And) 1-3 Rapid Vienna (Aut); Hapoel Tel Aviv (Isr) 2-0 Ludogorets (Bul); Alashkert (Arm) 1-1 CFR Cluj (Rou); Paide Linnameeskond (Est) 1-0 Zira (Aze); Vaduz (Lie) 4-0 Atletic Club d'Escaldes (And); NSI (Fro) 0-2 Koper (Svn); AEK Larnaca (Cyp) 0-1 Beitar Jerusalem (Isr); Partizan Belgrade (Srb) 4-0 UNA Strassen (Lux)

Second Qualifying Round – 2nd Leg

Jul 28-30:
Drita (Kos) 2-1 Floriana (Mal) (agg 3-2, *AET*); Riga (Lva) 5-2 Vardar (Mke) (agg 8-4, *AET*); Apollon Limassol (Cyp) 3-0 Dila Gori (Geo) (agg 7-0); CSKA 1948 (Bul) 0-0 Spartak Trnava (Svk) (agg 0-0, *AET, CSKA 1948 win 5-3 on pens*); Dukagjini (Kos) 1-5 Lugano (Sui) (agg 1-6); Copenhagen (Den) 2-1 Polissya Zhytomyr (Ukr) (agg 5-4); Rapid Vienna (Aut) 6-2 FC Santa Coloma (And) (agg 9-3); Petrocub Hincesti (Mda) 3-3 Borac Banja Luka (Bih) (agg 3-6); ETO Gyor (Hun) 1-1 Atert Bissen (Lux) (agg 7-3); Sutjeska (Mne) 1-2 ML Vitebsk (Blr) (agg 1-5); The New Saints (Wal) 1-0 Flora (Est) (agg 1-1, *AET, Flora win 4-2 on pens*); Derry City (Irl) 0-1 Rijeka (Cro) (agg 0-2); Inter Turku (Fin) 2-0 Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur) (agg 3-1); Coleraine (Nir) 0-3 HJK (Fin) (agg 0-8); Auda (Lva) 4-1 FCSB (Rou) (agg 7-3); Vestri (Isl) 1-1 RFS (Lva) (agg 2-5); Valletta (Mal) 0-4 Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) (agg 1-7); Austria Vienna (Aut) 4-1 Liepaja (Lva) (agg 5-1); Pyunik (Arm) 0-0 Debrecen (Hun) (agg 0-1); Nordsjaelland (Den) 6-0 GAIS (Swe) (agg 6-1); FCI Levadia (Est) 1-3 IFK Goteborg (Swe) (agg 3-4, *AET*); GKS Katowice (Pol) 3-1 Zilina (Svk) (agg 4-3); Jablonec (Cze) 2-0 Varazdin (Cro) (agg 4-3); Shkendija (Mkd) 3-1 Bravo (Svn) (agg 4-3); Brann (Nor) 3-1 Universitatea Cluj (Rou) (agg 5-3); Nomme Kalju (Est) 2-1 Shelbourne (Irl) (agg 4-6); Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) 2-2 Valur (Isl) (agg 2-3); Noah (Arm) 2-1 Zimbru Chisinau (Mda) (agg 3-2); Zalgiris (Ltu) 7-2 Dinamo Tbilisi (Geo) (agg 7-5); Dinamo City (Alb) 3-0 Aluminij (Svn) (agg 4-1); Velez Mostar (Bih) 0-3 DAC Dunajska Streda (Svk) (agg 0-4); Sion (Sui) 4-0 BATE Borisov (Blr) (agg 5-1); Ilves (Fin) 2-1 Stjarnan (Isl) (agg 2-2, *AET, Ilves win 5-4 on pens*); HB (Fro) 0-3 Motherwell (Sco) (agg 0-5); Tobol (Kaz) 1-1 Panevezys (Ltu) (agg 2-2, *AET, Tobol win 3-2 on pens*); Hibernian (Sco) 4-1 Malisheva (Kos) (agg 4-3); Dinamo Minsk (Blr) 0-1 Neftci (Aze) (agg 4-3); Panathinaikos (Gre) 2-2 Paks (Hun) (agg 4-2); Braga (Por) 4-0 Zeleznicar Pancevo (Srb) (agg 5-0); Ajax (Ned) 4-1 Vojvodina (Srb) (agg 8-2); Gent (Bel) 0-0 LNZ Cherkasy (Ukr) (agg 0-0, *AET, Gent win 4-2 on pens*); Ludogorets (Bul) 2-2 Hapoel Tel Aviv (Isr) (agg 2-4); CFR Cluj (Rou) 3-0 Alashkert (Arm) (agg 4-1); Ballkani (Kos) 3-2 Bohemians (Irl) (agg 4-4, *AET, Bohemians win 5-4 on pens*); Zira (Aze) 1-1 Paide Linnameeskond (Est) (agg 1-2); Atletic Club d'Escaldes (And) 0-2 Vaduz (Lie) (agg 0-6); Koper (Svn) 1-3 NSI (Fro) (agg 3-3, *AET, NSI win 4-3 on pens*); Beitar Jerusalem (Isr) 2-3 AEK Larnaca (Cyp) (agg 3-3, *AET, BeitarJerusalem win 4-3 on pens*); UNA Strassen (Lux) 0-1 Partizan Belgrade (Srb) (agg 0-5)

Third Qualifying Round – 1st Leg

Aug 4-6:
Auda (Lva) 1-0 Dinamo City (Alb); Panathinaikos (Gre) 1-1 CSKA 1948 (Bul); Brann (Nor) 0-1 Apollon Limassol (Cyp); Tre Fiori (Smr) 1-4 Drita (Kos); Borac Banja Luka (Bih) 1-0 ML Vitebsk (Blr); Inter Club d'Escaldes (And) 2-0 Flora (Est); Riga (Lva) 1-0 ETO Gyor (Hun); Inter Turku (Fin) 2-1 Vaduz (Lie); Zalgiris (Ltu) 2-5 Hajduk Split (Cro); Partizan Belgrade (Srb) 3-0 Tobol (Kaz); Ajax (Ned) 3-1 Shelbourne (Irl); Noah (Arm) 2-2 Sion (Sui); Braga (Por) 1-0 Dinamo Minsk (Blr); Valur (Isl) 0-2 Nordsjaelland (Den); Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) 1-3 St Gallen (Sui); Hapoel Tel Aviv (Isr) 2-0 GKS Katowice (Pol); Beitar Jerusalem (Isr) 1-2 Austria Vienna (Aut); CFR Cluj (Rou) 0-5 Tromso (Nor); Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) 1-0 Qarabag (Aze); Lugano (Sui) 2-0 NSI (Fro); Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) 0-0 Hammarby (Swe); HJK (Fin) 1-1 Motherwell (Sco); Hibernian (Sco) 2-1 Shkendija (Mkd); IFK Goteborg (Swe) 0-1 Gent (Bel); Paide Linnameeskond (Est) 1-4 Rapid Vienna (Aut); Bohemians (Irl) 0-2 Midtjylland (Den); Debrecen (Hun) 0-3 Copenhagen (Den); Jablonec (Cze) 2-0 RFS (Lva); Rijeka (Cro) 1-0 Ilves (Fin); Twente (Ned) 6-0 DAC Dunajska Streda (Svk)

Third Qualifying Round – 2nd Leg

Aug 11-13:
CSKA 1948 (Bul) 1-2 Panathinaikos (Gre) (agg 2-3, *AET*); Apollon Limassol (Cyp) 2-4 Brann (Nor) (agg 3-4, *AET*); GKS Katowice (Pol) 2-1 Hapoel Tel Aviv (Isr) (agg 2-3); Copenhagen (Den) 5-1 Debrecen (Hun) (agg 8-1); Rapid Vienna (Aut) 2-0 Paide Linnameeskond (Est) (agg 6-1); Dinamo City (Alb) 4-0 Auda (Lva) (agg 4-1); Drita (Kos) 5-0 Tre Fiori (Smr) (agg 9-1); ML Vitebsk (Blr) 2-1 Borac Banja Luka (Bih) (agg 2-2) (*AET, Borac Banja Luka win 4-2 on pens*); Flora (Est) 0-4 Inter Club d'Escaldes (And) (agg 0-6); ETO Gyor (Hun) 1-1 Riga (Lva) (agg 1-2); Vaduz (Lie) 2-2 Inter Turku (Fin) (agg 3-4); Hajduk Split (Cro) 4-0 Zalgiris (Ltu) (agg 9-2); Tobol (Kaz) 1-2 Partizan Belgrade (Srb) (agg 1-5); Shelbourne (Irl) 2-2 Ajax (Ned) (agg 3-5); Sion (Sui) 2-1 Noah (Arm) (agg 4-3); Dinamo Minsk (Blr) 0-0 Braga (Por) (agg 0-1); Nordsjaelland (Den) 5-0 Valur (Isl) (agg 7-0); St Gallen (Sui) 5-1 Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) (agg 8-2); Austria Vienna (Aut) 1-2 Beitar Jerusalem (Isr) (agg 3-3) (*AET, Austria Vienna win 4-2 on pens*); Tromso (Nor) 2-1 CFR Cluj (Rou) (agg 7-1); Qarabag (Aze) 2-0 Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) (agg 2-1); NSI (Fro) 2-2 Lugano (Sui) (agg 2-4); Hammarby (Swe) 0-1 Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) (agg 0-1); Motherwell (Sco) 2-0 HJK (Fin) (agg 3-1); Shkendija (Mkd) 0-0 Hibernian (Sco) (agg 1-2); Gent (Bel) 1-1 IFK Goteborg (Swe) (agg 2-1); Midtjylland (Den) 3-2 Bohemians (Irl) (agg 5-2); RFS (Lva) 1-2 Jablonec (Cze) (agg 1-4); Ilves (Fin) 1-1 Rijeka (Cro) (agg 1-2); DAC Dunajska Streda (Svk) 3-3 Twente (Ned) (agg 3-9)

2026 UEFA SUPER CUP

Aug 12 – Salzburg
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 2 (Kvaratskhelia 20, Doue 61)
Aston Villa (Eng) 1 (Madjo 45)
Paris Saint-Germain: Safonov – Hakimi, Marquinhos, Pacho, Mendes (Hernandez 75); Zaire-Emery, Vitinha, Joao Neves (Fabian 75); Doue (Mayulu 87), Aklioucche (Dembele 46), Kvaratskhelia (Beraldo 88).
Aston Villa: Bizot – Cash, Lindelof, Torres (Mings 79), Maatsen; Kamara (Bogarde 72), Joao Gomes (Barkley 79); McGinn (Alysson 73), Buendia, Hemmings; Madjo (Abraham 72).

2026 DUTCH SUPER CUP

Aug 2 – Eindhoven
PSV 0
AZ 4 (Meerdink 25, Patati 51, Dijkstra 58, Daal 66 pen)

2026 PORTUGUESE SUPER CUP

Aug 1 – Coimbra
Porto 1 (Froholdt 38)
Torreense 0

SOUTH AMERICA

2026 COPA LIBERTADORES

Round of 16 – 1st Leg

Aug 11 – La Plata
Estudiantes (Arg) 1 (Tobio Burgos 4)
Universidad Catolica (Chi) 1 (Zampedri 80)

Aug 11 – Rio de Janeiro
Fluminense (Bra) 0
Independiente Rivadavia (Arg) 0

Aug 11 – Ibague
Tolima (Col) P
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) P
Postponed due to the Colombian earthquake

Aug 12 – Belo Horizonte
Cruzeiro (Bra) 1 (Arroyo 53)
Flamengo (Bra) 1 (Paqueta 67)

Aug 12 – Buenos Aires
Platense (Arg) 1 (Gimenez 35)
Coquimbo Unido (Chi) 1 (Vadala 90+4)

Aug 12 – Sao Paulo
Palmeiras (Bra) 1 (Lopez 82)
Cerro Porteno (Par) 1 (Carlos Miguel 90+3 og)

Aug 13 – Mirassol
Mirassol (Bra) 1 (Eduardo 15)
LDU Quito (Ecu) 1 (Estrada 82)

Aug 13 – Rosario
Rosario Central (Arg) 0
Corinthians (Bra) 0

2026 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 1st Leg

Jul 21 – Montevideo
Nacional (Uru) 0
Tigre (Arg) 3 (Elias 2, Russo 45+4, Cabrera 90)

Jul 21 – Valencia
Universidad Central (Ven) 1 (Ruiz 87)
Santos (Bra) 4 (Bontempo 35, Menino 57, Thaciano 67, Rony 84)

Jul 22 – Lima
Sporting Cristal (Per) 0
Red Bull Bragantino (Bra) 0

Jul 22 – Medellin
Independiente Medellin (Col) 2 (Montano 45+4, 72)
Vasco da Gama (Bra) 2 (Varela 46 og, Spinelli 86)

Jul 22 – Lanus
Lanus (Arg) 2 (Watson 35, Carrera 90+5)
Cienciano (Per) 0

Jul 23 – La Paz
Bolivar (Bol) 3 (Cauteruccio 2, Robson Matheus 18, Asprilla 58)
Gremio (Bra) 2 (Villasanti 16, Tete 23)

Jul 23 – Buenos Aires
Boca Juniors (Arg) 1 (Merentiel 44)
O'Higgins (Chi) 0

Jul 23 – Bogota
Santa Fe (Col) 2 (Rodallega 30, Fagundez 84)
Caracas (Ven) 0

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 2nd Leg

Jul 28 – Victoria
Tigre (Arg) 1 (Lopez 82)
Nacional (Uru) 2 (Gomez 11, Silvera 31)
Tigre win 4-2 on aggregate

Jul 28 – Santos
Santos (Bra) 4 (Miguelito 39, Gabriel Barbosa 56, Menino 65, Rony 90+5)
Universidad Central (Ven) 2 (Sosa 1, Mottes 72)
Santos win 8-3 on aggregate

Jul 29 – Braganca Paulista
Red Bull Bragantino (Bra) 1 (Pedro Henrique 59)
Sporting Cristal (Per) 0
Red Bull Bragantino win 1-0 on aggregate

Jul 29 – Rio de Janeiro
Vasco da Gama (Bra) 1 (Thiago Mendes 85)
Independiente Medellin (Col) 0
Vasco da Gama win 3-2 on aggregate

Jul 29 – Cusco
Cienciano (Per) 4 (Garces 7, 45+1, Hohberg 40, 90+5)
Lanus (Arg) 0
Cienciano win 4-2 on aggregate

Jul 30 – Porto Alegre
Gremio (Bra) 0
Bolivar (Bol) 1 (Asprilla 16)
Bolivar win 4-2 on aggregate

Jul 30 – Rancagua
O'Higgins (Chi) 1 (Gonzalez 72)
Boca Juniors (Arg) 0
1-1 on aggregate; Boca Juniors win 4-3 on pens

Jul 30 – Cabudare
Caracas (Ven) 0
Santa Fe (Col) 3 (Bustos 56, Figueroa 77 og, Fagundez 83)
Santa Fe win 5-0 on aggregate

Round of 16 – 1st Leg

Aug 11 – Buenos Aires
Boca Juniors (Arg) 3 (Ascacibar 49, Delgado 51, Flores 62)
Recoleta (Par) 1 (Rios 5)

Aug 11 – La Paz
Bolivar (Bol) 1 (Melgar 63)
Sao Paulo (Bra) 1 (Arboleda 23)

Aug 12 – Braganca Paulista
Red Bull Bragantino (Bra) 0
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 1 (Cuello 73)

Aug 12 – Bogota
Santa Fe (Col) P
River Plate (Arg) P
Postponed due to the Colombian earthquake

Aug 12 – Buenos Aires
Tigre (Arg) 0
Montevideo City Torque (Uru) 1 (Pizzichillo 53)

Aug 13 – Cusco
Cienciano (Per) 6 (Succar 18, 30, 78, Bandiera 20, 62, Martinich 35)
Botafogo (Bra) 1 (Matheus Martins 49)

Aug 13 – Rio de Janeiro
Vasco da Gama (Bra) 0
Olimpia (Par) 0

Aug 13 – Santos
Santos (Bra) 2 (Gabriel Barbosa 44, Willian Arao 76)
Macara (Ecu) 1 (Posse 5)

URUGUAY

Intermedio Serie A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Penarol*	7	5	1	1	12	3	16
Cerro Largo	7	3	2	2	7	5	11
Racing	7	2	4	1	4	3	10
Liverpool	7	2	3	2	5	5	9
Central Espanol	7	2	3	2	4	4	9
Cerro	6	3	0	3	5	8	9
Boston River	7	1	2	4	5	10	5
Defensor Sporting	6	0	3	3	4	8	3

*Advance to final

Intermedio Serie B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Montevideo Wanderers*	7	4	3	0	12	4	15
Nacional	7	4	1	2	8	8	13
Deportivo Maldonado	7	3	3	1	12	6	12
Montevideo City Torque	7	4	0	3	11	11	12
Juventud	7	2	2	3	8	11	8
Albion	7	1	3	3	6	8	6
Progreso	7	2	0	5	6	11	6
Danubio	7	0	4	3	5	9	4

*Advance to final

Final

Aug 5 – Montevideo
Penarol 5 (Espinosa 14, Arezo 22, Hernandez 30, Jaime 45, Remedi 89)
Montevideo Wanderers 1 (Cosentino 19)

CONCACAF

2026 LEAGUES CUP

Matchday 1

Aug 4-6:
Columbus Crew (USA) 3-1 Atlas (Mex); FC Cincinnati (USA) 3-1 Pachuca (Mex); Charlotte FC (USA) 3-0 Pumas UNAM (Mex); Minnesota United (USA) 1-2 Juarez (Mex); Tigres UANL (Mex) 1-1 Real Salt Lake (USA) (*Tigres UANL win 6-5 on pens*); Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) 0-1 Atlante (Mex); Inter Miami (USA) 4-2 Atletico San Luis (Mex); Monterrey (Mex) 1-2 Orlando City (USA); Nashville SC (USA) 0-1 Leon (Mex); FC Dallas (USA) 2-0 Queretaro (Mex); Los Angeles FC (USA) 1-1 Guadalajara (Mex) (*Los Angeles FC win 6-5 on pens*); Toluca (Mex) 3-0 Seattle Sounders (USA); New York City FC (USA) 2-0 Santos Laguna (Mex); Cruz Azul (Mex) 1-0 Philadelphia Union (USA); Chicago Fire (USA) 2-0 Necaxa (Mex); Austin FC (USA) 2-0 Tijuana (Mex); Portland Timbers (USA) 5-2 Puebla (Mex); America (Mex) 3-1 San Diego FC (USA)

Matchday 2

Aug 7-9:
Charlotte FC (USA) 2-0 Atlas (Mex); Columbus Crew (USA) 2-1 Pachuca (Mex); FC Cincinnati (USA) 2-0 Pumas UNAM (Mex); Tigres UANL (Mex) 0-0 Minnesota United (USA) (*Tigres UANL win 4-2 on pens*); Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) 1-3 Juarez (Mex); Orlando City (USA) 1-2 Leon (Mex); Inter Miami (USA) 1-2 Monterrey (Mex); Guadalajara (Mex) 0-1 FC Dallas (USA); Real Salt Lake (USA) 4-0 Atlante (Mex); Toluca (Mex) 0-1 Los Angeles FC (USA); Seattle Sounders (USA) 3-0 Queretaro (Mex); Cruz Azul (Mex) 2-1 New York City FC (USA); Philadelphia Union (USA) 3-1 Necaxa (Mex); Chicago Fire (USA) 3-1 Santos Laguna (Mex); Nashville SC (USA) 4-1 Atletico San Luis (Mex); Austin FC (USA) 3-0 Puebla (Mex); America (Mex) 3-1 Portland Timbers (USA); San Diego FC (USA) 1-0 Tijuana (Mex)

Matchday 3

Aug 11-13:
Columbus Crew (USA) 1-1 Pumas UNAM (Mex) (*Columbus Crew win 3-2 on pens*); Charlotte FC (USA) 0-1 Pachuca (Mex); FC Cincinnati (USA) 1-2 Atlas (Mex); Minnesota United (USA) 3-1 Atlante (Mex); Real Salt Lake (USA) 3-0 Juarez (Mex); Tigres UANL (Mex) 1-1 Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) (*Tigres UANL win 5-4 on pens*); Orlando City (USA) 2-2 Atletico San Luis (Mex) (*Orlando City win 5-3 on pens*); Inter Miami (USA) 2-3 Leon (Mex); Monterrey (Mex) 2-1 Nashville SC (USA); Toluca (Mex) 3-1 FC Dallas (USA); Los Angeles FC (USA) 1-1 Queretaro (Mex); (*Los Angeles FC win 5-3 on pens*); San Diego FC (USA) 3-2 Puebla (Mex); Seattle Sounders (USA) 1-2 Guadalajara (Mex); Philadelphia Union (USA) 0-2 Santos Laguna (Mex); New York City FC (USA) 1-2 Necaxa (Mex); Cruz Azul (Mex) 1-2 Chicago Fire (USA); America (Mex) 1-1 Austin FC (USA) (*Austin FC win 6-5 on pens*); Portland Timbers (USA) 3-1 Tijuana (Mex)

Liga MX Final Standings

	P	W	PW	PL	L	GD	Pts
Leon*	3	3	0	0	0	+3	9
America*	3	2	0	1	0	+4	7
Toluca*	3	2	0	0	1	+4	6
Monterrey*	3	2	0	0	1	+1	6
Cruz Azul	3	2	0	0	1	+1	6
Juarez	3	2	0	0	1	0	6
Tigres UANL	3	0	3	0	0	0	6
Guadalajara	3	1	0	1	1	0	4
Pachuca	3	1	0	0	2	-2	3
Santos Laguna	3	1	0	0	2	-2	3
Atlas	3	1	0	0	2	-3	3
Necaxa	3	1	0	0	2	-3	3
Atlante	3	1	0	0	2	-5	3
Atletico San Luis	3	0	0	1	2	-5	1
Pumas UNAM	3	0	0	1	2	-5	1
Queretaro	3	0	0	1	2	-5	1
Tijuana	3	0	0	0	3	-5	0
Puebla	3	0	0	0	3	-7	0

*Advance to finals stage

MLS Final Standings

	P	W	PW	PL	L	GD	Pts
Chicago Fire*	3	3	0	0	0	+5	9
Austin FC*	3	2	1	0	0	+5	8
Columbus Crew*	3	2	1	0	0	+3	8
Real Salt Lake*	3	2	0	1	0	+7	7
Los Angeles FC	3	1	2	0	0	+1	7
Charlotte FC	3	2	0	0	1	+4	6
Portland Timbers	3	2	0	0	1	+3	6
FC Cincinnati	3	2	0	0	1	+3	6
FC Dallas	3	2	0	0	1	+1	6
San Diego FC	3	2	0	0	1	0	6
Orlando City	3	1	1	0	1	0	5
Minnesota United	3	1	0	1	1	+1	4
Nashville SC	3	1	0	0	2	+1	3
Inter Miami	3	1	0	0	2	0	3
New York City FC	3	1	0	0	2	0	3
Seattle Sounders	3	1	0	0	2	-1	3
Philadelphia Union	3	1	0	0	2	-1	3
Vancouver Whitecaps	3	0	0	1	2	-3	1

*Advance to finals stage

2026 CANADIAN CHAMPIONSHIP

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Jul 8:
Vancouver Whitecaps 4-1 Cavalry; Vancouver FC 1-2 CF Montreal; CS Saint-Laurent 1-1 Forge; Supra 3-1 Atletico Ottawa

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Jul 12-13:
CF Montreal 2-1 Vancouver FC (agg 4-2); Forge 2-1 CS Saint-Laurent (agg 3-2); Cavalry 1-1 Vancouver Whitecaps (agg 2-5)

Aug 11:
Atletico Ottawa 3-3 Supra (agg 4-6)

2026 CFU CARIBBEAN CLUB SHIELD

First Round

Jul 23-24:
Dublanc (Dma) 1-3 St John's Sports (Grn); SWA Sharks (Tca) 0-4 Slingerz (Guy); La Clery (Lca) 2-1 Roaring Lions (Aia); North Leeward Predators (Vin) 3-1 SCSA Eagles (Sma); St Paul's United (Skn) 0-3 Helenites (Vir); Elite (Cay) 2-0 Virgin Gorda United (VGB)

Round of 16

Jul 25-26:
Prison Service (Tri) 3-4 Slingerz (Guy); Mount Pleasant (Jam) 1-0 (w/o) All Saints United (Atg); Britannia (Aru) 1-1 Weymouth Wales (Brb) (*Weymouth Wales win 4-3 on pens*); Robinhood (Sur) 2-0 La Clery (Lca); Baltimore (Hai) 0-1 (w/o) Helenites (Vir); Inter Willemstad (Cuw) 5-2 St John's Sports (Grn); Metropolitan (Pur) 4-0 North Leeward Predators (Vin); Delfines del Este (Dom) 2-0 Elite (Cay)

Quarter-Finals

Jul 28:
Mount Pleasant (Jam) 1-0 Weymouth Wales (Brb); Helenites (Vir) 1-2 Metropolitan (Pur); Slingerz (Guy) 0-4 Robinhood (Sur); Inter Willemstad (Cuw) 1-1 Delfines del Este (Dom) (*Delfines del Este win 6-5 on pens*)

Semi-Finals

Jul 31:
Mount Pleasant (Jam) 3-1 Robinhood (Sur); Metropolitan (Pur) 0-0 Delfines del Este (Dom) (*Delfines del Este win 10-9 on pens*)

Final

Aug 2:
Mount Pleasant (Jam) 1-0 Delfines del Este (Dom)

2026 CENTRAL AMERICAN CUP

Group A

Jul 28-29:
Diriangen (Nca) 4-2 Plaza Amador (Pan); Alajuelense (Crc) 1-0 Xelaju (Gua)

Aug 4:
Plaza Amador (Pan) 2-1 Firpo (Slv); Diriangen (Nca) 1-3 Alajuelense (Crc)

Aug 11-13:
Plaza Amador (Pan) 5-2 Xelaju (Gua);
Firpo (Slv) 4-0 Diriangen (Nca)

Group B

Jul 29-30:
Alianza (Slv) 2-1 Antigua (Gua);
Herediano (Crc) 0-0 Marathon (Hon)

Aug 4-5:
Antigua (Gua) 0-2 Real Esteli (Nca);
Alianza (Slv) 1-0 Herediano (Crc)

Aug 11-13:
Real Esteli (Nca) 3-1 Alianza (Slv);
Antigua (Gua) 0-3 Marathon (Hon)

Group C

Jul 28-29:
Olimpia (Hon) 2-0 Mixco (Gua);
UMECIT (Pan) 1-2 Saprissa (Crc)

Aug 5:
UMECIT (Pan) 1-2 Olimpia (Hon);
Saprissa (Crc) 2-1 Alianza FC (Pan)

Aug 11-13:
Saprissa (Crc) 3-0 Mixco (Gua);
Alianza FC (Pan) 1-0 UMECIT (Pan)

Group D

Jul 28-30:
Verdes (Blz) 0-5 Motagua (Hon);
Municipal (Gua) 1-1 Cartagines (Crc)

Aug 6:
Verdes (Blz) 0-1 Municipal (Gua);
Motagua (Hon) 1-0 FAS (Slv)

Aug 12:
Motagua (Hon) 1-1 Cartagines (Crc);
FAS (Slv) 4-1 Verdes (Blz)

Final Table 2025-26

FRENCH GUIANA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Le Geldar (C)	20	12	5	3	56	24	61
Karib	20	12	4	4	35	22	60
Agouado	20	12	2	6	46	24	58
Cosma Foot	20	10	5	5	49	38	55
Etoile de Matoury	20	12	2	6	36	25	54
Sinnamary	20	9	5	6	52	33	52
Grand-Santi	20	8	7	5	32	27	51
US Matoury	20	7	6	7	30	28	47
Loyola	20	6	7	7	28	37	45
Armire	20	6	6	8	23	29	44
Olympique de Cayenne	20	5	2	13	26	45	37
Aigles d'Or de Mana*	20	4	4	12	32	48	36
Remire (R)	20	3	6	11	19	55	34
Cayenne (R)	20	0	5	15	16	51	23

*Enter promotion-relegation play-off
Win = 4 points, Draw = 2 points, Loss =1 point

ASIA

2026-27 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

West Region

Qualifying Play-Offs

Aug 11:
Al Jazira (UAE) 1-4 Al Ittihad (KSA);
Pakhtakor (Uzb) 3-0 Al Hussein (Jor)

• Al Ahli, Al Nassr, Al Hilal & Al Qadsiah (KSA), Al Ain, Shabab Al Ahli & Al Wasl (UAE), Al Sadd, Al Gharafa & Al Shamal (Qat), Esteghlal & Tractor (Irn), Neftchi (Uzb) and Al Quwa Al Jawiya (Irq) all automatically advance to the league stage

East Region

Qualifying Play-Offs

Aug 11:
Gangwon FC (Kor) 0-1 Gamba Osaka (Jpn) (*AET*);
Adelaide United (Aus) 0-2 Cong An Hanoi (Vie)

• Kashima Antlers, Vissel Kobe, Kashiwa Reysol & Kyoto Sanga (Jpn), Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors, Daejeon Hana Citizen & Pohang Steelers (Kor), Buriram United, Port & Ratchaburi (Tha), Shanghai Port & Beijing Guoan (Chn), Newcastle Jets (Aus) and Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) all automatically advance to the league stage

2026-27 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO

West Region

Qualifying Play-Offs

Aug 12:
East Bengal (Ind) 4-1 Al Arabi (Kuw) (*AET*);
Arkadag (Tkm) 3-0 Goa (Ind)

• Al Taawoun (KSA), Al Wahda (UAE), Al Rayyan (Qat), Gol Gohar (Irn), Nasaf (Uzb), Al Shorta (Irq), Al Faisaly (Jor), Al Muharraq & Al Khaldiya (Bhr), Al Seeb & Al Nahda (Oma), Al Kuwait (Kuw) and the AFC Champions League Elite qualifying stage losers automatically advance to the league stage

East Region

Qualifying Play-Offs

Aug 31:
Persib Bandung (Idn) v Manila Digger (Phi)

• Machida Zelvia (Jpn), FC Seoul (Kor), BG Pathum United (Tha), Shanghai Shenhua (Chn), Melbourne Victory (Aus), Kuching City (Mas), The Cong–Viettel (Vie), Lion City Sailors & Tampines Rovers (Sgp), Kitchee & Tai Po (Hkg), PKR Svay Rieng & Phnom Penh Crown (Cam) and the AFC Champions League Elite qualifying stage losers automatically advance to the league stage

2026-27 AFC CHALLENGE LEAGUE

West Region

Qualifying Play-Offs

Aug 11-12:
Dordoi Bishkek (Kgz) 1-1 Homs Al Fidaa (Syr) (*AET, Homs Al Fidaa win 8-7 on pens*);
Fortis (Ban) 1-0 Muras United (Kgz); Al Ittihad Ahli (Syr) 1-0 Bangladesh Police (Ban); Paro (Bhu) 2-0 Abu Muslim (Afg); Maziya (Mdv) 0-3 Regar-TadAZ (Tjk)

• Ahal (Tkm), Al Qadsia (Kuw), Ansar & Nejmeh (Lbn), Istiklol (Tjk) and the AFC Champions League Two qualifying stage losers automatically advance to the league stage

East Region

Qualifying Play-Off

Aug 11:
Central Stallions (Mng) 1-1 Tainan City TSG (Tpe) (*AET, Tainan City TSG win 5-3 on pens*);
Ulaanbaatar (Mng) 1-2 Hang Yuan (Tpe)

Sep 8:
Ezra (Lao) v Yangon United (Mya);
Kasuka (Bru) v Karketu Dili (Tls)

• Borneo (Idn), One Taguig (Phi), Shan United (Mya) and the AFC Champions League Two qualifying stage losers automatically advance to the league stage

Final Tables 2025-26

IRAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Esteghlal	22	11	8	3	29	16	41
Tractor	22	10	9	3	30	12	39
Sepahan	22	11	6	5	24	13	39
Gol Gohar*	23	10	6	7	24	24	36
Chadormalou*	22	9	8	5	27	19	35
Persepolis*	22	9	7	6	23	19	34
Foolad	22	7	10	5	21	16	31
Fajr Sepasi	23	8	6	9	25	27	30
Kheybar	23	7	8	8	22	24	29
Malavan	22	7	8	7	13	21	29
Esteghlal Khuzestan	22	6	7	9	16	23	25
Paykan	23	5	9	9	15	21	24
Shams Azar	23	3	13	7	15	19	22
Aluminium Arak	22	5	7	10	14	21	22
Zob Ahan	21	3	10	8	12	19	19
Mes Rafsanjan** (R)	22	3	6	13	13	29	1

*Advance to Asia play-offs
**Enter promotion-relegaton play-off
• League abandoned with no champions declared

Asia Play-Offs – Semi-Finals

Jun 26: Chadormalou 2-1 Persepolis (*AET*)

Asia Play-Off Final

Jun 29: Gol Gohar 0-0 Chadormalou (*AET, Chadormalou win 7-6 on pens*)

Promotion-Relegaton Play-Off

Jul 22: Mes Rafsanjan 0-3 Naft Abadan

LEBANON

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ansar (C)	27	20	5	2	64	16	39
Nejmeh	27	17	6	4	50	15	34
Jwaya	27	12	7	8	37	22	24
Ahed	27	13	4	10	41	34	23
Safa	21	11	3	7	30	17	36
Sagesse	21	9	3	9	29	27	30
Shabab Sahel	21	7	6	8	22	21	27
Mabarra	21	5	7	9	12	36	22
Riyadi Abbasiyah	25	8	6	11	24	32	20
Tadamon Sour	25	5	9	11	17	29	16
Racing Beirut (R)	25	0	1	24	6	71	1
Bourj* (R)	11	3	1	7	8	20	10

*Withdrew
• *Teams play each other twice before the league is split into two groups (a top and bottom four), with points halved and rounded up*

MONGOLIA

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ulaanbaatar	16	13	2	1	65	9	41
Central Stallions	16	12	3	1	54	14	39
Khangarid	16	10	3	3	59	19	33
Deren	16	9	3	4	57	16	30
Hunters	16	7	3	6	44	27	24
Khovd Western	16	5	3	8	29	36	18
Khovd Khuleguud	16	4	0	12	28	73	12
Bishrelt Khoromkhon	16	2	0	14	27	86	6
Ulaangom City	16	1	1	14	16	99	4
SP Falcons*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

*Withdrew
• *Top four advance to championship round, bottom five teams enter relegation round with points carried over in full*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ulaanbaatar (C)	22	17	2	3	81	19	53
Central Stallions	22	14	4	4	60	26	46
Deren	22	14	3	5	70	23	45
Khangarid	22	10	4	8	68	34	34

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Hunters	20	11	3	6	72	29	36
Khovd Western	20	7	3	10	37	42	24
Khovd Khuleguud	20	5	1	14	39	86	16
Ulaangom City	20	3	2	15	27	117	11
Bishrelt Khoromkhon	20	2	0	18	31	109	6
SP Falcons*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

*Withdrew

TIMOR-LESTE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sport Laulara e Benfica (C)	9	8	1	0	22	2	25
Santa Cruz	9	7	2	0	19	4	23
Karketu Dili	9	5	2	2	14	10	17
DIT FC	9	4	0	5	14	12	12
Emmanuel FC	9	3	2	4	10	13	11
Porto Taibesse	9	2	4	3	8	10	10
Coracao	9	3	1	5	11	20	10
Assalam	9	2	3	4	9	16	9
Marca (R)	9	0	4	5	7	19	4
Aitana (R)	9	0	3	6	6	14	3

AFRICA

Final Table 2025-26

GUINEA-BISSAU

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Canchungo (C)	30	19	6	5	41	17	63
Portos de Bissau	30	18	5	7	47	28	59
Cupelum	30	17	7	6	43	27	58
CDR Gabu	30	14	9	7	30	18	51
Bissau e Benfica	30	12	10	8	35	22	46
Massaf	30	12	7	11	41	36	43
Sporting CGB	30	11	6	13	24	28	39
UDIB	30	9	11	10	38	32	38
Hafia de Bafata	30	9	10	11	45	39	37
Cumura	30	8	10	12	30	31	34
Arados de Nhacra	30	9	7	14	27	40	34
Pelundo	30	7	13	10	27	36	34
Os Balantas	30	7	11	12	29	42	32
Cuntum	30	8	7	15	33	40	31
Flamengo (R)	30	7	8	15	27	42	29
Tigre de Fronteira (R)	30	7	5	18	17	56	26

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GROUP EDITOR
Stephen Fishlock

MANAGING EDITOR
Jamie Evans

DIGITAL MANAGING EDITOR
Jared Tinslay

DESIGN
Sean Phillips, atg-media.com

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Juraj Vrdoljak & Steve Menary

EDITORIAL
Kelsey Media, The Granary, Downs Court, Yalding Hill, Yalding, Maidstone, Kent, ME18 6AL

ADVERTISING AND SPONSORSHIP
Smart Media Sales: Mike Allen
Tel. 07917 588 511
Email: mike@smartmediasales.co.uk

PUBLISHER Steve Brown
MANAGING DIRECTOR OF CONSUMER ADVERTISING Oswin Grady
OPERATIONS DIRECTOR Gill Lambert
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PRINT PRODUCTION CONTROLLER
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DISTRIBUTION
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Lubomir Moravcik

Celtic v Juventus

2001-02 Champions League group stage, Glasgow

The Slovakian playmaker looks back on a special European night at Celtic Park

"I had a great time at Celtic. I didn't expect to join such a big club at the end of my career. I wasn't known in that part of Europe so people were sceptical about me, especially the press. Jozef Venglos, my former national team coach, signed me because he trusted that I was good enough. Nobody believed him, but I proved that he was right.

This was my final season at Celtic. I was 36 by then and I wasn't playing regularly so I didn't expect to be picked against Juventus. But Martin O'Neill told me that I was going to play in the days leading up to the game.

I'd always dreamed of playing in the Champions League and this was the only time I ever started in the competition. I was so excited. It had taken so long, I didn't think it was ever going to come. I wanted to show everybody that I should have been playing at that level earlier.

I knew the quality of the players I'd be up against – Juventus were really strong – but we also had a very good team so we were always confident, especially in front of 60,000 fans at Celtic Park.

Martin was very clever and honest. He didn't complicate football. We played forward and got the ball into the box because we had very good strikers in Henrik Larsson and Chris Sutton. It was simple but effective. As the playmaker, it was my duty to create chances, which I did that night. I was involved in setting up all four of our goals.

Alessandro Del Piero was one of the best players in the world at the time. His decisions in the final third – dribbling, passing, shooting – were brilliant. He scored a great free-kick to give Juventus the lead. I liked Pavel Nedved too. We didn't get to play together for Czechoslovakia before the split but I enjoyed meeting him on the pitch. We even swapped shirts after the game.

I could use both feet, which made me difficult for defenders to read. For our first goal, I went to cross with my left foot and then my right. That created the space to put the ball in with my left foot and Joos Valgaeren scored with a diving header.

Celtic star...Moravcik on Champions League duty

Martin knew I could cause problems from set-pieces, putting good balls into the box for players like Larsson, Sutton, Valgaeren and Johan Mjallby to attack. That was an important weapon for us. It worked as Sutton headed in my corner to make it 2-1 just before half-time.

Special night... Moravcik takes on the Juve defence

Juventus responded by bringing on David Trezeguet. I remember his first goal, a left-footed strike into the far corner. He was a great finisher who was always a threat. We had to watch him carefully, but we continued to attack. Larsson scored a penalty and then Sutton volleyed in his second from my free-kick to make it 4-2.

Martin took me off after that. The Celtic fans gave me a standing ovation as I left the pitch. It felt really good to see how much they appreciated my performance. Playing for them was a gift and a responsibility. I always gave my maximum.

Juventus pulled another goal back through Trezeguet, but we held on to win. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough to progress. We won all three of our group-stage games at home but lost all three away games – that was the problem.

> "It was my duty to create chances, which I did – I was involved in setting up all four of our goals"

Whenever I go back to Glasgow, fans ask me about this game and how it felt. I was so happy. I enjoyed playing to the best of my ability, like a small child whose dream had come true."

Interview by Sean Cole

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